

#223: APRIL 2017 • INDYPENDENT.ORG

# THE INDYPENDENT

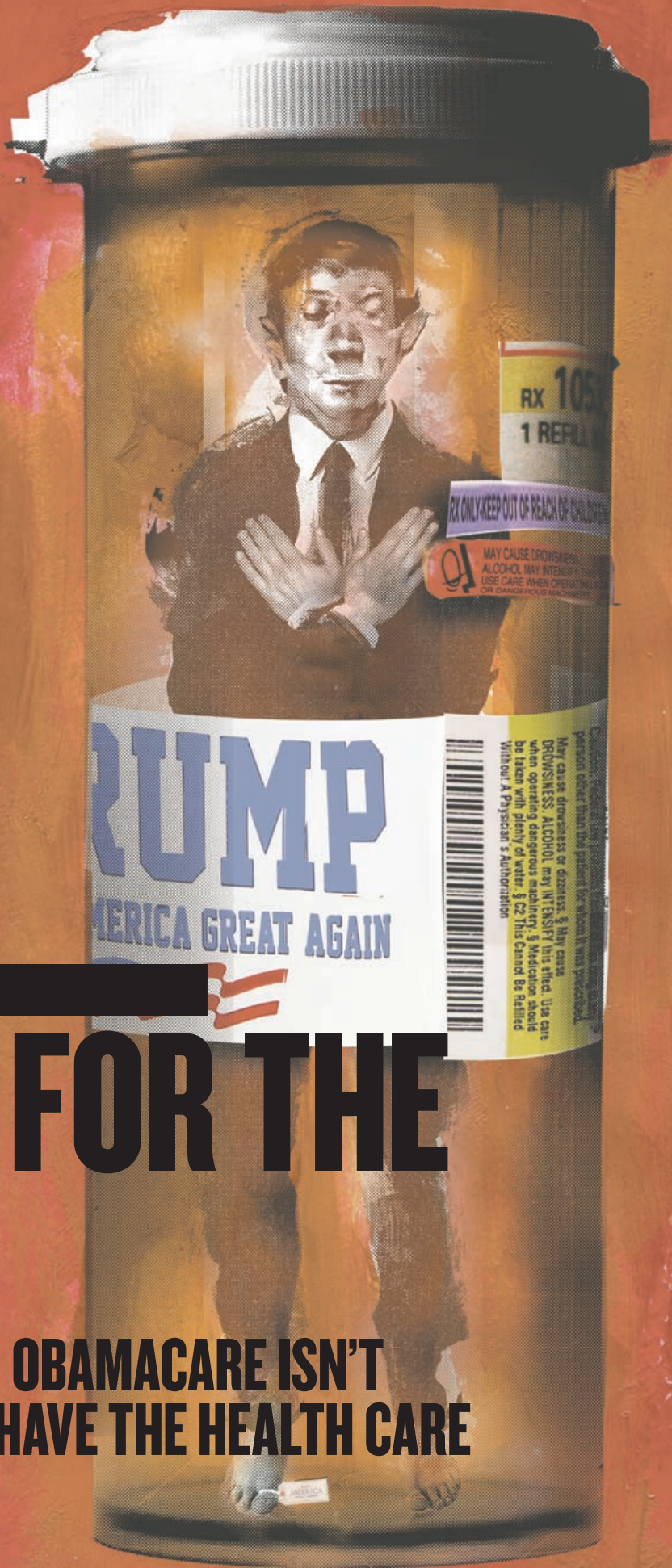
**JERK CHICKEN VS.  
GENTRIFICATION, P6**

**SOCIALISTS GET  
ORGANIZED, P8**

**40 YEARS OF DIRECT  
ACTION, P18**

## MEDICINE FOR THE PEOPLE

**TRUMPCARE HAS BOMBED. OBAMACARE ISN'T  
ENOUGH. CAN WE FINALLY HAVE THE HEALTH CARE  
SYSTEM WE NEED?, P12**  
**BY NICHOLAS POWERS**







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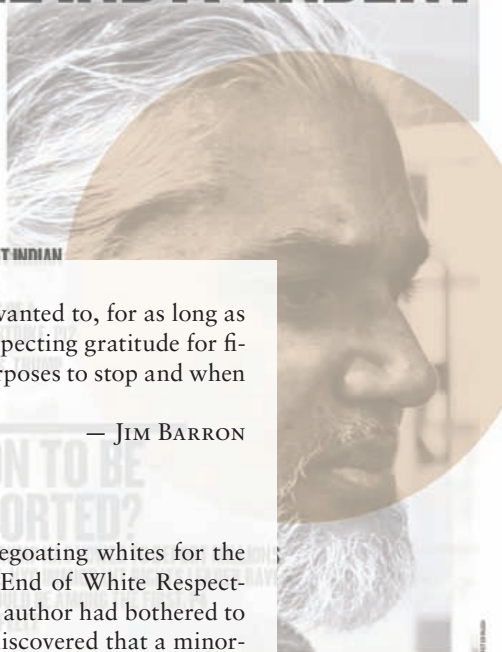
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# READERS' VOICE

#222: MARCH 2017 • INDYPENDENT.ORG

## THE INDYPENDENT



### *A Good Man is Hard to Find*

Ravi Ragbir is a fine person of good character who has spent many years reaching out to others in immigration jeopardy like himself (“Walk With Me,” March Indypendent). As the article shows, he thinks of others even when he is defending his own status here in the United States. I am crying inside for him and his wife at the thought that he might be removed from us. That would be a terrible mistake and a miscarriage of justice. Leave this good man to do his work!

— ANNE E. WRIGHT

### *Quit While You're Behind*

The Democrats have not been an effective opposition party for at least 40 years (“Which Way Forward,” March Indypendent). Their strategy of pretending to be for workers and women and minorities while serving the 1% has been a miserable failure. They now control only a handful of states and nothing at all in Washington. It's ridiculous to believe that the people that presided over this catastrophic defeat are now going to resurrect the party. They should just declare the party dead and disband now.

— CHARLES DUNAWAY

### *No Excuse*

If you want a day off (“Dreaming of a General Strike,” March Indypendent), just take it! Don't use Trump as an excuse!

— JOSE MATIAS

### *Covering All Our Home Bases*

Excellent journalism — clear, concise and sparkingly readable (“Home Sweet Home,” March Indypendent). Lauren Kaori Gurley adroitly covers all the relevant points of view and personalizes the issue of legal representation in housing court — a topic that is of much social interest. Thank you!

— BRIAN WALLACE

### *Not What It Seems*

What was achieved here ("A Victory 50 Years in the Making," March Indypendent) is a sham PR "victory" that in reality changed nothing. The owners of the Indian Point

nuclear power plant did what they wanted to, for as long as they wanted to do it and are now expecting gratitude for finally stopping when it suits their purposes to stop and when they'd always intended to stop.

— JIM BARRON

### *Equal Opportunity Exploitation*

Nothing like stereotyping and scapegoating whites for the crimes of the super wealthy (“The End of White Respectability,” March Indypendent)! If the author had bothered to do a little research, he would have discovered that a minority of whites elected Trump into office. A minority of white, plutocratic oligarchs steal democracy from the people and enact legislation that only benefits their oligarchy. That same minority oppresses whites, along with everyone else. This is not a racial war of whites versus people of color. This is a war on people of all races conducted by an equal opportunity exploiter.

— KEVIN SCHMIDT

### *Man of the Pizza*

Great article (“Make Pizza Great Again!” March Indypendent). Remember, however, Donald Trump and Sarah Palin do not consider themselves elites.

— DAVID BLANCHARD

### *Busy Work*

The United States is dependent on its global dominance and low wages to sustain its currently unsustainable employment rate (“Trump Through Mexican Eyes,” March Indypendent). Any disturbance in the economy is likely to send employment tumbling again. The only reason our unemployment rate is as low as it is because A) Americans are able to go basically anywhere in the world to work, since we essentially control most of the world and B) because low wage service jobs like fast food and retail work are keeping most Americans barely afloat, many with government assistance.

— MICHAEL

### COMMENT ON THE NEWS AT INDYPENDENT.ORG

# THE REBELS ON THE BUS GO “DOWN WITH TRUMP!”

THE INDY IS HEADING TO WASHINGTON FOR THE HISTORIC PEOPLE'S CLIMATE MARCH ON APRIL 29 AND WE WANT YOU TO JOIN US. SICK AND TIRED OF OUR FOUL-MOUTHED PRESIDENT STICKING UP FOR POLLUTERS? HOP ON THE INDY CLIMATE BUS. WE'RE FOLLOWING A ROUTE THAT BENDS TOWARDS JUSTICE.

TICKETS AVAILABLE AT [WWW.BIT.LY/2MKOM22](http://WWW.BIT.LY/2MKOM22) OR CALL (212) 904-1282.

## COMMUNITY CALENDAR

APRIL

**THRU MAY 14**

Thurs 1PM–9PM, Fri–Sun 12PM–5PM • Donations suggested  
**EXHIBIT: FINALLY GOT THE NEWS**

Uncovers the hidden legacy of the radical left of the 1970s, a decade when vibrant social movements challenged racism, imperialism, patriarchy and capitalism itself. It uses original printed materials — from pamphlets to posters, flyers to record albums — to tell this politically rich and little-known story.

Interference Archive  
 131 8th St. #4

**TUE APRIL 4**

6PM–8PM • Free  
**FILM: OUR VOICES: TRANS STORIES, TRANS JUSTICE, TRANS RESILIENCY**

In a time when transgender and gender nonconforming communities remain under attack, this film screening and panel will highlight ways trans communities fight back, build community and center the intersectional work essential to survival. Featuring Giselle Bleuz, Devin Lowe and Luce Lincoln of Global Action Project, Marin Watts of Trans Justice Funding Project and Olympia Perez and Sasha Alexander of Black Trans Media. Barnard Center for Research on Women  
 3009 Broadway  
 James Room, 4th Fl  
 bcrw.barnard.edu • 212-854-2067

**TUE APRIL 4**

\$10–\$15  
**SPECIAL SCREENING: 1984**  
 Anthology Film Archives and IFC Center are joining over 90 arthouse theaters around the country to bring George Orwell's dystopian classic *1984* back to the big screen. Tickets available at ifccenter.com and on the day of the show at Anthology Film Archives box office. Check with theaters for showtimes.  
 IFC Center  
 323 6th Ave  
 Anthology Film Archive  
 32 2nd Avenue

**FRI APR 7 TO SAT APR 8**

Free  
**TRAINING: ORGANIZING 2.0**  
 Organizing 2.0 is an annual, volunteer run event offering training in online political organizing, digital strategy and use of online tools. The event

welcomes labor activists, progressives, nonprofits, tech firms, faith communities and techies of all stripes. Get your hack on. For more, see Organizing20.org  
 The Joseph S Murphy Institute  
 25 W 43rd St Fl 19

**FRI APRIL 7**

7PM  
**READING: FBOMB NY FLASH FICTION**

An offshoot of the popular Denver reading series, this event features some of the city's best minds in fiction reading their mini-stories at Manhattan's coolest literary bar. KGB Bar & Lit Mag  
 85 E 4th St.

**SAT APRIL 8**

2PM • \$20  
**BENEFIT CONCERT: SUPPORT COMMUNITY DEFENSE AGAINST DEPORTATION**

For the Brooklyn Defense Committee (BDC), a community-based group building a network of sanctuary spaces in Brooklyn, especially in neighborhoods with high concentration of immigrants. Featuring: Marc Ribot & Sofia Rei, Chelsea Reject and Kill Alters.  
 Union Pool  
 484 Union Ave

**TUE APRIL 11**

6PM • Free  
**DISCUSSION: WITH ALICIA GARZA**  
 The Barnard Center for Research on Women hosts a lecture from Alicia Garza, an Oakland-based political organizer, writer and freedom dreamer who, along with Opal Tometi and Patrisse Cullors, co-founded the Black Lives Matter movement.  
 Barnard Center for Research on Women  
 3009 Broadway

**THU APR 13 THRU SUN APR 30**

8PM Thu–Sat, 3PM Sun Matinees • \$15, \$12 seniors/students, \$10 groups  
**THEATER: THE FACULTY ROOM**  
 Faculty members at James Baldwin High School find themselves under mandatory lockdown when two star players on the girls' basketball team have a gun battle over a common boyfriend. Tickets at theaterforthenewcity.net.  
 Theater for the New City  
 155 1st Ave

**SAT APRIL 15**

9PM–2AM • \$10–\$20 suggested donation  
**BENEFIT PARTY: DANCE WITH THE INDY**  
 Feeling inundated by fake news and orange-haired madness? The Indy has been keeping it real since the year 2000. Come celebrate independent media in the age of Trump. Beats by DJ Stylus.  
 Starr Bar  
 214 Starr St.

**WED APR 19 THRU SUN APR 30**

**MOVIES: TRIBECA FILM FESTIVAL**  
 The Tribeca Film Festival celebrates the power of storytelling in a variety of forms — from film to TV, VR to online work, music to gaming. Ticket prices range from \$12 for weekday matinee screenings to triple digit all-inclusive packages. More at tribecafilm.com.  
 54 VARICK ST.

**WED APRIL 19**

7PM • \$20, 16+  
**MUSIC: HOT 8 BRASS BAND**  
 For over 20 years, they have been one of the most popular and visible funk-style brass bands at community parades and funerals in New Orleans. Fresh out of the studio, the Hot 8 Brass Band are coming to town, performing with Viva La Hop and Space Captain. Check out their new album, *On the Spot*, and catch them at Webster Hall. Tickets at TicketWeb.com.  
 The Marlin Room at Webster Hall  
 125 E 11th St.

**THU APRIL 20**

8PM • \$15  
**MUSIC: PRINCESS NOKIA**  
 Play some ping-pong in this former Polish dining hall and checkout an up-and-coming New York rapper.  
 Brooklyn Bazaar  
 150 Greenpoint Ave

**SAT APR 22 & SAT APR 29**

6PM–11:59 PM • \$5  
**FOOD: QUEENS NIGHT MARKET SNEAK PEEK**  
 The Queens Night Market will be free and open to all again starting on May 6th. In the meantime, check out this preview. Half the proceeds raised will go to local nonprofits, including the New York Immigration Coalition. Feast on a dizzying array of Burmese palatas, Japanese takoyaki, Romanian chimney cakes, Valencian paella, Indonesian tahu magelang, Middle Eastern stews, Ecuadorian bollos,

Barbadian fishballs, Nigerian puff-puff, crawfish pies, gumbo and Puerto Rican mofongo, Persian sweets and Macedonian relish. No dish will cost more than \$6. Live music and performances.  
 Flushing Meadows Corona Park  
 47-01 111th St.  
 queensnightmarket.com

**THU APRIL 27**

7:30PM–9:30PM • \$6 - \$15 suggested donation  
**AUTHOR DISCUSSION: THE EXPLOSION OF DEFERRED DREAMS**  
*The Explosion of Deferred Dreams* offers a critical re-examination of the interwoven political and musical happenings in San Francisco in the Sixties. Native San Franciscan Mat Callahan explores the dynamic links between the Black Panthers and Sly and the Family Stone, the United Farm Workers and Santana, the Indian Occupation of Alcatraz and the San Francisco Mime Troupe, the New Left and the counterculture.  
 Commons Brooklyn  
 388 Atlantic Ave

**FRI APR 28 TO SUN APR 30**

\$20–\$35  
**MUSIC: 9TH ANNUAL BROOKLYN FOLK FESTIVAL**  
 Ready. Set. Hurl your banjos. Presented by the Jalopy Theatre & School of Music, the Brooklyn Folk Fest is a celebration of downhome music, cultural diversity and memory. Don't miss the world famous banjo tossing contest. Visit brooklynfolkfest.com for tickets and more information.  
 St. Ann's Church  
 157 Montague St.

**SAT APRIL 29**

6AM–9 PM • \$50  
**HOP ON THE INDY BUS ROADTRIP:** Join The Independent — staff, reporters and editors — as we trek to our nation's capital for the historic People's Climate March on Washington. Seats are limited, reserve them now at bit.ly/2mK0m22 or call (212) 904-1282. Departing from the Commons Brooklyn  
 388 Atlantic Ave

**PARTY WITH US:**

Every month we tell you all about events other outfits are hosting. This time we're throwing the party! Join us at Starr Bar on April 15 to celebrate independent media in the age of Trump.

**TOTALITARIAN STATE OF**

**ATTRACTION:** On April 4, arthouse movie theaters across the country are screening George Orwell's dystopian thriller *1984*. The film stars the late, great John Hurt (left) and Suzanna Hamilton (right). Turn off your phone, remove your sim card and watch Big Brother for once.



# FREE, FOR NOW

## NYC IMMIGRANT ADVOCATE RAVI RAGBIR FACES A NEW DEPORTATION CHECK-IN ON APRIL 11

BY RENÉE FELTZ

“**T**his is a sea of love,” proclaimed Ravi Ragbir as the Trinidadian immigrant arrived at Foley Square, across from his deportation check-in at 26 Federal Plaza, and found the hundreds of people who had gathered to support him. “This is like the Katrina that is going to overtake any wall that is going to be built, because this sea, that is love, is going to make that change.”

As *The Independent* reported in its last issue, Ragbir is a leading New York City immigrant rights advocate and executive director of the New Sanctuary Coalition. He has helped pioneer an “Accompaniment Program” for such check-ins that has taken on new significance under Trump because more people are being detained at what used to be routine appearances.

Three City Council members who rallied for Ragbir on March 9 actually joined him for his check-in, along with his wife and lawyer. Outside people circled the federal building in a Jericho Walk, largely silent until those who had signed up for text alerts received a message:

“Ravi checked in, and everything is ok with him for now. Thanks for all the support.”

Everyone exhaled sighs of relief and Reverend Billy and his choir — which Ragbir has sung with for the past two years — made a joyful noise. Soon Ragbir emerged, his arms linked on either side with Councilmembers Jumaane Williams and Ydanis Rodriguez. They expressed relief when he was allowed to leave about an hour later, but could not forget what they witnessed at the local office of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

“It was the most un-American thing I have seen in a very long time,” Williams said. “I see a room full of terrified people facing deportation with no legal representation at all — grandmothers in [electronic monitoring] bracelets, single parents with children waiting to hear if they were deported or not.”

Ragbir himself still faces what he calls a “guillotine over my neck.” Even though he has a stay of deportation in place until 2018, his deportation officer asked him to return on April 11 and to make efforts to get a travel document, one of the first steps in the removal process.

“I’m not going to just sit back quietly and just let them take me away,” Ragbir said afterward, fighting back tears. “I’m going to stand up. I’m going to fight. I’m going to speak about this. And I’m going to invite you all to join me.”

• • •

LIKE MILLIONS OF NEW YORKERS over the years,

Ragbir came to the United States with a visitor’s visa and later acquired a green card. But ten years after his arrival he was convicted of conspiracy to commit wire fraud for a mortgage lender and served two years in prison before he was transferred to immigrant detention and released two additional years later.

If he was labeled by his rap sheet, President Obama might have called Ragbir a “criminal alien” and Trump may use the term, “bad hombre.” But in New York City, his dedication to advocating for immigrants facing deportation has made him a respected authority on the topic. So just two weeks after his check-in, Ragbir was able to keep his commitment to appear on a panel about New York as a sanctuary city alongside the speaker of the City Council, Melissa Mark-Viverito.

“This is the reality we are living,” Mark-Viverito said as she described one of her undocumented constituents who had recently faced harassment from her landlord but was afraid to report it despite efforts to reduce NYPD collaboration with ICE.

The speaker used the event to outline policy changes the city has made “in order to limit people being run through the mill,” such as forging an agreement with local district attorneys to dismiss decades-old warrants, and making some minor offenses punishable by a summons, which is less likely to trigger deportation.

mesh Palaniandi, an immigrant from Guyana. Guyanese natives are the second-largest immigrant group in Queens.

“There were so many people that the police allowed us to block off the street to walk for ten blocks,” Ragbir recalled.

Palaniandi was detained at what was supposed to be a normal check-in on the same day Ragbir was cleared for another month, even though his appeals

are still pending and he lived with his wife, who is a U.S. citizen. She was at the rally for Ragbir when her husband called to say they were taking him away.

“So even though we came out it was bittersweet,” Ragbir recalled, noting that “we are looking into ways to get him released soon.”

In the meantime he says people are also strategizing in preparation for his own fast-approaching meeting with a deportation officer. A recent email update from his defense committee urged supporters to “save the date of Ravi’s check-in: Tuesday, April 11th, at 8:15 AM in Foley Square.” Further plans will be posted on the New Sanctuary Coalition’s social media pages.

“People have gotten the understanding they can do

**“I’M NOT GOING TO JUST SIT BACK QUIETLY AND LET THEM TAKE ME AWAY.”**

Efforts to make the city a safe space for immigrants felt hollow to some in the crowd, such as Oscar Diaz of ICE Free NYC, who argued “there is no sanctuary city” because the NYPD’s broken-windows policing of poor and predominantly people of color neighborhoods continues to generate new criminal records.

When it was Ragbir’s turn to speak he insisted that “sanctuary cities can only work if everyone becomes part of the movement,” saying, “we want to see sanctuary in the schools, the restaurants as well as churches.”

ICE had conducted raids in Staten Island because “they knew they would be welcomed,” he insisted. “You have to step up now and engage your community to step up with you so we can stop this.”

“Ravi’s point about what role we all play is critically important,” Mark-Viverito agreed. “It is about being engaged in ways you didn’t think of.”

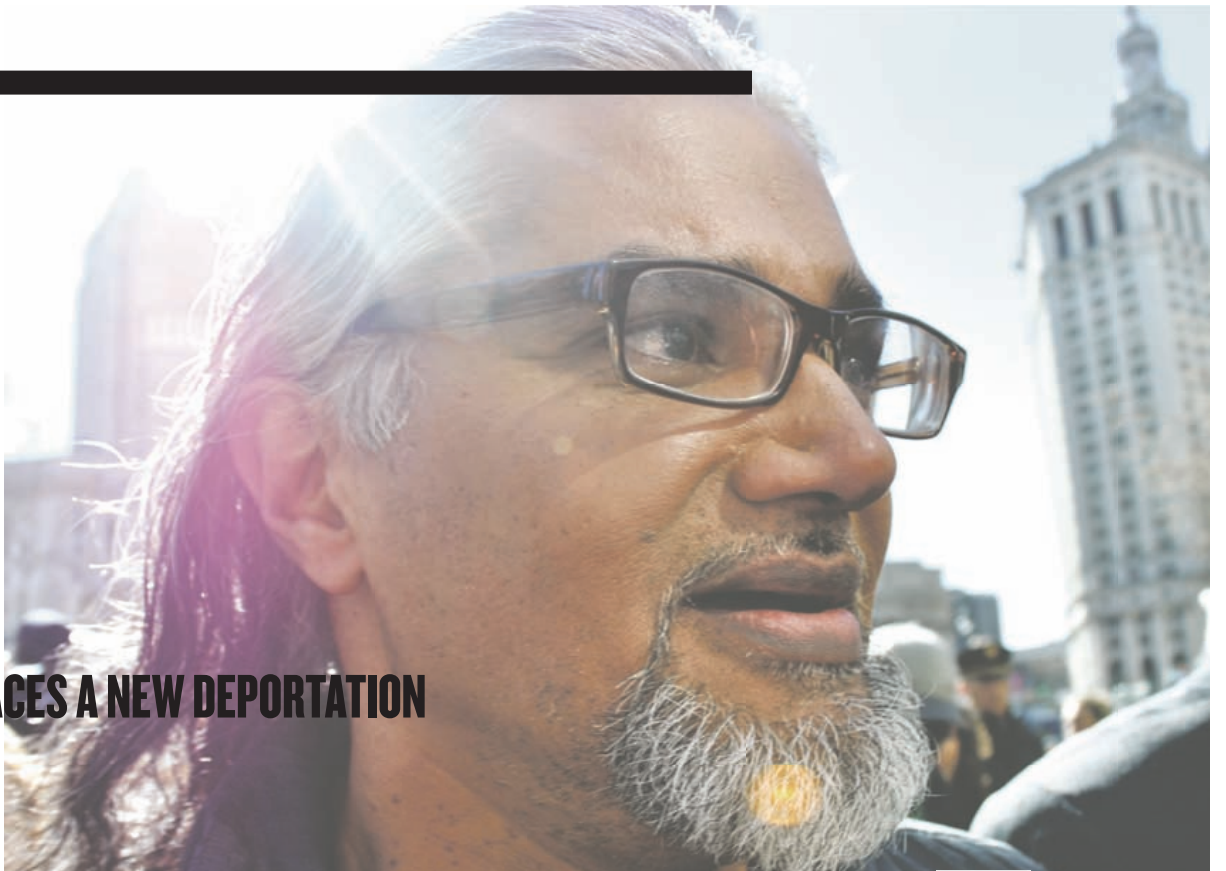
• • •

WEEKS LATER, AT A PROTEST deep in Queens, Ragbir marched alongside several City Council members who joined hundreds in calling for the release of Ra-

### ACCOMPANY

**ME:** Ravi Ragbir at Foley Square on March 9 before reporting to ICE for his annual check-in. Hundreds of people came out on a cold weekday morning to support Ragbir whose story was featured on the cover of the March *Independent*.

PETER RUGH





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# JERK CHICKEN VS. GENTRIFICATION

ERROL'S, A BELOVED FLATBUSH EATERY, WAS ALMOST EVICTED. BUT, IN WHAT COULD BE A CITYWIDE MODEL FOR FUTURE FIGHTS, RESIDENTS RALLIED ON ITS BEHALF

BY COLIN KINNIBURGH

On Jan. 7, as the first big storm of the winter was busy dumping nearly a foot of snow on the New York area, more than 25 neighbors and activists rallied on the corner of Flatbush Avenue and Hawthorne Street in Brooklyn with signs reading: “Give Errol’s a New Lease!” The beloved Errol’s Bakery, a Flatbush staple renowned citywide for its Jamaican patties and jerk chicken, was facing eviction after 15 years on the block, and the community was having none of it. “Greedy landlords go away, we want Errol’s Bakery to stay!” the group chanted as the snow pelted down.

The rally was the second of three community actions organized in support of Errol’s by Equality for Flatbush after the group’s lead organizer, Imani Henry, learned in late November that the bakery’s owners, Dorothy and Errol Miller, had been denied a new lease and were facing eviction.

“We had no problem the first 15 years,” explained Errol Miller. The Millers say they had never missed a rent payment since opening the bakery in 2001, and the building’s owner, Rothstein Management, had so far offered them successive five-year leases without any issue. But last year, when the lease was up, the landlord stopped answering the Millers’ calls without explanation, only to take them to court when Errol’s stayed put after the lease expired.

Unlike roughly half of New York’s residential tenants, whose right to renew their lease is protected by rent-stabilization laws, commercial tenants like the Millers are at the mercy of the market. As a result, one small business after another has been pushed out by skyrocketing rents. On a five-block stretch of Bedford Avenue in Williamsburg, now the most expensive commercial strip in the borough, commercial rents have climbed a staggering 477 percent over the past decade.

With rents finally leveling off in the most condo-filled areas, landlords and developers are shifting their sights to less-gentrified neighborhoods like Flatbush, the heart of Brooklyn’s Afro-Caribbean community. A new report by the real-estate services company CPEX lists the intersection of Flatbush Avenue and Church Avenue, just a few blocks down from Errol’s Bakery, as one of six Brooklyn retail areas “poised for growth” in the Williamsburg mold over the coming years.

Area landlords are counting on it. Rather than gradually raising the rents on businesses, advocates say, landlords are actively kicking tenants out and keeping stores vacant while they wait for the gentrification wave to hit. According to Shelley Kramer, vice president of Parkside Empire Flatbush Avenue Merchants Association, at least 22 storefronts along the 10-block stretch of Flatbush Avenue between Empire Boulevard and Parkside Avenue are currently vacant. Errol’s almost became one of them.

“All of a sudden the landlord doesn’t want me to be here,” Errol Miller said of Rothstein Management. “He doesn’t want to talk to me about no lease, he just takes me to court. I worked in this community 30 years, and he just want to take it away from me.” He connects the plight of black- and immigrant-owned businesses in the neighborhood to luxury developments like 626 Flatbush Avenue, a 23-story tower completed last summer, where rents start at \$2,044 a month for a studio — and exceed \$4,500 for a three-bedroom apartment. “[With] the high-rise building there ... no small businesses can stay around here,” he says. “Once the lease is up, you have to go.”

Last May, a court ordered the Millers to vacate the space by the end of November. As word began to spread about the bakery’s impending eviction, the court extended the deadline to Feb. 28, and community members rallied around this neighborhood institution. Equality for Flatbush began circulating a petition online to save Errol’s, and held its first rally outside the shop last Dec. 17. Passers-by joined the dozen-odd picketers in support.

“This is traditionally an immigrant neighborhood,” said Al Saint Jean, a Flatbush resident and organizer with the Black Alliance for Immigrant Justice. “Errol’s is a testament to that, along with many of the other establishments here. They’re part of the economic foundation of this neighborhood and invested in this neighborhood long before it got gentrified, long before folks with money started moving in here.”

Two months, two protests and more than 1,500 petition signatures later, the Millers finally secured a new five-year lease from Rothstein Management.

While the Millers and the community around them are celebrating this victory, the struggle of small businesses like Errol’s is far from over. Supporting families like the Millers is one reason Equality for Flatbush has launched a new “rapid response legal fund,” to connect small-business owners as well as other low-income tenants and homeowners to trusted lawyers.

Meanwhile, as one beloved neighborhood institution after another has been forced to shutter by escalating rents, a coalition of small businesses, residents and advocacy groups under the banner Take Back NYC is making a renewed push to pass the Small Business Jobs Survival Act. The bill would allow commercial tenants to bring rent increases to arbitration and give them the right to get 10-year leases.

New York City had commercial rent control for 18 years after World War II, until the regulations expired in 1963. A bill to revive it was introduced in the City Council in the 1980s, but was strongly opposed by real-estate interests and Mayor Ed Koch, and died in committee. An earlier version of the Small Business Jobs Survival Act was introduced in 2009, but then-Speaker Christine Quinn blocked a vote on it, claiming it had vague “legal problems.” Councilmember Annabel Palma (D-Bronx) introduced the revived

version in 2014, and by late 2015, 27 of the 51 councilmembers had signed on as cosponsors. But Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito has blocked a vote on it. Early last year, she instead announced an alternate planning study “to develop recommendations for strengthening our small-business community through land use policy and other tools, such as tax incentives.”

Members of Take Back NYC insist that there is no need for another study, and that the speaker’s plan is little more than a stalling tactic to placate real-estate interests. “How can the Speaker acknowledge ‘unaffordable rent increases’ as the core problem and then not address it in her solution?” the coalition demanded in March 2016. It called the proposed study “another Trojan horse from City Hall ... to keep the status quo,” and charged that Mark-Viverito was selling out to the Real Estate Board of New York, the powerful developers’ lobbying group that has long opposed restrictions on commercial rents.

As of press time, the bill remains stalled.

Still, the Errol’s victory marks what activists hope will be a turning point in the fight against gentrification, in Flatbush and beyond. The campaign’s success “not only demonstrates how much people appreciate small businesses in our neighborhoods, but it also shows what is possible when a community comes together,” says Soraya Palmer, lead organizer with Equality for Flatbush and a lifelong neighborhood resident. “What this victory shows is that we can stop the displacement of residents and businesses in our neighborhoods.”

On a cold Saturday in early March, Errol’s is bustling, and the taste of victory is still in the air. A sign out front reads, “To everyone who prayed with us and for us, who stood in the frigid cold, mounting snow and the rain to let your voices be heard... to those who stopped by daily to give an encouraging word, words are not enough to express how grateful we are to have the support of you all.” Now, when the bakery’s loyal customers stop by Errol’s for their patties, spice bread and oxtail, they can enjoy the fruit of their collective action, too.

**THIS BAKER’S WORK ISN’T DONE:** Mccarlo Scott helps a customer at Errol’s Bakery on March 25. With community help, Errol’s owners Dorothy and Errol Miller received a new lease from Rothstein Management, which sought to evict the Flatbush staple.



PETER RUGH



# PUTTING A LID ON THE BID

QUEENS ACTIVISTS BLOCK CONTROVERSIAL BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT

BY JESSE RUBIN

A four-year battle to prevent a controversial Business Improvement District from being established along the main commercial corridor in the immigrant communities of Jackson Heights and Corona ended recently in victory for neighborhood activists who had warned the project would accelerate gentrification in western Queens.

"It's a very significant win," said Tania Mattos, an organizer at Queens Neighborhoods United (QNU) and a native of Jackson Heights, a majority immigrant neighborhood. "We always kind of new we would win this because the community never supported this."

There are presently 73 BIDs in New York City. They are private-public partnerships formed by a majority of property owners in a given neighborhood, which essentially privatize public services while hitting while levying additional fees on local residents. A larger police presence also come with BIDs.

The ill-fated Jackson Heights-Corona Business Improvement District would have run along Roosevelt Avenue — a noisy artery known for its authentic Latin culture and vibrant nightlife — from 81st to 114th Streets. It would have incorporated several important retail shopping areas and impacting hundreds of small businesses as well as street vendors who are an essential part of the neighborhoods fabric. Its defeat marks only the second time since the 1980s that a proposed BID has been stopped.

"Business Improvement Districts work in the interests of property owners," explained Mattos. "Property owners demand that BIDs work with local law enforcement in 'cleaning up' an area to look and feel aesthetically pleasing. This means, getting rid of anything or anyone who is deemed unpleasant."

Local City Councilwoman Julissa

Ferreras welcomed the proposal in 2013 as "a New Deal for Roosevelt Avenue" but the plan soon met vociferous opposition from QNU and other neighborhood groups.

Sergio Ruiz, an immigrant who came to Jackson Heights 16 years ago expressed his opposition, a sentiment echoed by many of his neighbors.

"They want to kick out all the neighbors, all the businesses so they can put in other people," Ruiz said from the back of his bakery and grocery store La Estrella. "They want to improve the neighborhood, and improving it means kicking us out to put in another type of

## A HAVEN FOR ALL:

Residents of Jackson Heights and Corona fought and won a battle to maintain their neighborhood's working class, immigrant character.

**"THEY WANT TO KICK OUT ALL THE NEIGHBORS, ALL THE BUSINESSES SO THEY CAN PUT IN OTHER PEOPLE"**

people and another type of business."

Even with the defeat of the BID, major real estate development projects are in the works across Queens.

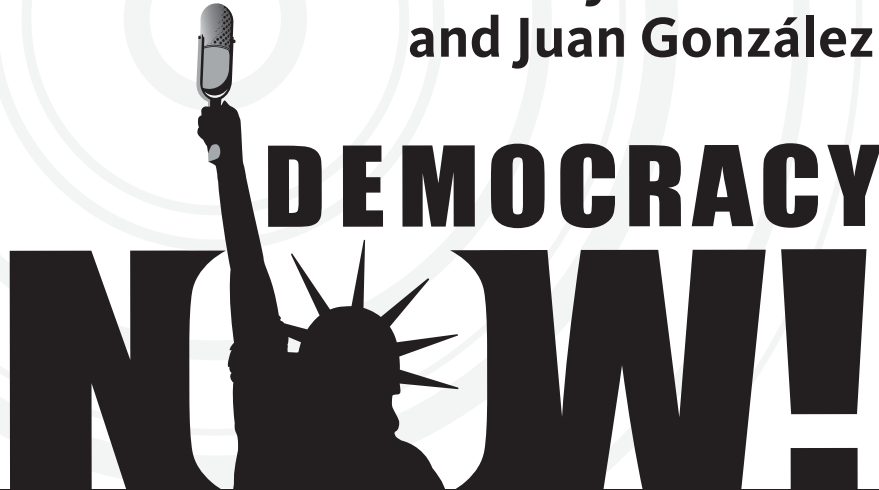
Hector Marquez, owner of the Manhattan Cocktail Lounge, remains uncertain like many other small business owners about his future in the neighborhood. His rent will likely increase after his current two-year lease runs out, as Jackson Heights continues attracting new upper-middle class residents who the BID sought to attract in the first place.

"If I have to move, where?" Marquez asked.



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—FROM THE FOREWORD BY CORNEL WEST

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# BUILDING POWER FROM THE GRASSROOTS

DSA, A ONCE OBSCURE SOCIALIST GROUP, HAS BALLOONED IN NUMBER SINCE NOVEMBER. THEY'RE ATTEMPTING TO USE THEIR NEWFOUND POPULARITY TO SHAKEUP POLITICS AS USUAL

BY PETER RUGH

“I’m calling on Crown Heights,” shouts New York State Assemblywoman Diana Richardson. “I’m calling on East Flatbush, Bedford-Stuyvesant, Fort Greene, Clinton Hill. Rise up and pay attention.”

Richardson is testifying in the Baptist sense of the word and her remarks are greeted with various interjections of “yes” and “that’s right” from the 30 or so people assembled on the steps of City Hall.

“The fight we are fighting here today is everybody’s fight,” she continues.

This is supposed to be a press conference but it is a Sunday and colder than a traffic cop’s smile out here. Aside from a half-frozen fellow from the local NBC affiliate who isn’t bothering to film Richardson’s speech, I’m the only reporter in the vicinity. You can tell by the banners the people on the steps are holding which constituencies had the gumption to brave the weather. There’s Picture the Homeless, New York Communities for Change, members of construction locals 78, 79 and 100. “Kill the deal,” their signs demand. But in the mix I also spot a red rose, the emblem of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), emblazoned on a placard reading “This land is our land.”

It’s through battles like this one, over the future of the Bedford-Union Armory in Crown Heights — taking place far from the pages of the *New York Times* yet central, nonetheless, to the future of the city — that this once obscure socialist group is building a base of supporters and allies.

DSA membership grew steadily last spring when the Democratic primary campaign kicked into high gear, thanks the organization’s involvement in Bernie Sanders’ presidential run, and has since tripled following the election of Donald Trump in November. The group now boasts more than 19,000 members nationwide making it, by far, the largest socialist organization in America. It is a “Honey, I blew up the left,” situation. The DSA is helping to funnel thousands of people, many of them millennials into grassroots social justice campaigns across the country.

“I joined right after Trump got elected,” said Jabari Brisport, who was among the DSA members on hand for the press conference. Brisport has been an activist for years — going to marches, performing political theatre — but he started attending DSA meetings in November and began paying dues to the group a couple of months ago.

“It’s important to build up a strong left in light of fascism,” Brisport said. “Our goal is to build a mass socialist movement so that the economy can be restructured to meet people’s needs. We partner with other organizations. We don’t try to coopt movements. We try to augment them and amplify them. That’s what we’re doing right here.”

Brisport is a third-generation resident of Prospect Heights, which neighbors Crown Heights. He witnessed gentrification as it forced many longterm residents out of his native neighborhood and doesn’t want to see it happen again.

“That battle was lost,” he said. “We can’t let that happen in Crown Heights, too.”

While the DSA’s explosive growth is unprecedented in recent history, there’s also a case to be made that activists like Brisport are carrying on a longstanding socialist tradition in New York City. Rent strikes and eviction defenses led by militant tenant activists helped win some of the most progressive renters’ protections on the books in New York today. Reds were also early pioneers of the civil rights movement forcing department stores in Harlem to hire black workers and traveling to the south to protest segregation decades ahead of the Freedom Riders.

“You could go to some Jewish working class areas in the Bronx in the 30s and 40s and it was a two-party town there: either you were socialist or communist,” said Bhaskar Sunkara, editor of *Jacobin Magazine* and a member of the DSA’s National Political Committee. “That’s the terrain politics operated on.” Sunkara wants to shift that terrain once more along political boundary lines drawn by class.

“We need to look at where are the existing workers’ centers, the existing immigrant rights centers, the existing working class struggles,” said Sunkara. “Let’s go and not just support from afar, not just [express] solidarity but embed ourselves, throw ourselves into this struggle. We’re taking risks and showing that we’re involved and connected at the hip. We shouldn’t always think of socialism as being from afar, people coming into support the solidarity effort.”

Celeste Hornbach of the Crown Heights Tenants Union already considered herself a socialist for a number of years and had worked with the Sander’s campaign, but like Jabari Brisport, she joined after the election. DSA’s eagerness to help bolster grassroots campaigns attracted Hornbach to the group.

“What I’ve learned as a tenant and through my activism is that the market is not going to provide housing for working class people,” she said. “We need to have community control of our land and our housing and we need public subsidies to get us to point where there is housing for working class people in New York City.”

• • •

THAT BATTLE FOR HOUSING in Brooklyn is centered at the moment on the Bedford Armory, a 138,000 square-foot, red-brick, castle-like structure that has stood dormant between Atlantic Avenue and Pacific Street for decades. Erected in the style of Roman revival popular in the 1890s when it was built to house the Army’s 23rd Regiment, the building was briefly home to William Ran-

**COMBINING ELECTORAL WORK AND ISSUE-BASED CAMPAIGNS “IS REALLY POWERFUL IN A CIRCULAR KIND OF WAY,” SAYS ONE PARTY ACTIVIST.**

dolph Hearst’s Cosmopolitan Studios in the 1920s, before Hollywood became the capital of the movie-making world. Currently it is the site of a different type of production, one all too familiar to New Yorkers in recent years, a narrative as worn out as that of any blockbust film. If it were a film, it might be called *Gentrification: The Final Reckoning*, given the wide-ranging impact the \$196 million development will have on surrounding Crown Heights and the precedent it could set across the five boroughs.

The developer, BFC Partners, says that of the housing units it plans to build 50 percent will be affordable. But affordability is relative. The median income for a family of four in Crown Heights was \$41,870 in 2014, according to the most recent data available from the Furman Center at New York University. Yet, only 20 percent of the total units BFC plans to build will be for households earning under \$46,000 per year.

The development will likely serve as a giant Crest whitening strip for the black and afro-carib neighborhood since, as a March report from Communities for Change notes, white families will be far more likely to afford housing at the Bedford Army than their black and Latino counterparts. Unable to afford the rent hikes in the surrounding area that result from the development, longtime people-of-color tenants will be displaced.

## NO JEHOVAH’S

**WITNESS:** Una Duncan (right), who has lived across the street from the Bedford Armory for nearly 40 years, speaks with DSA organizer Samuel Lewis on March 26. Lewis and comrades are canvassing Crown Heights, registering people to vote and warning residents about plans to build luxury condos with public money at the armory.





PETER RUGH

"This project in it's current configuration is going to increase stress on families," Assemblywoman Richardson told me. "It's going to increase homelessness. The data is there. Sixty thousand people are homeless [in New York City]. Ninety new homeless shelters are being opened up. All we're asking for is real affordable housing."

Although Richardson lives two blocks from the Bedford Armory, the development isn't technically in her district and, in any case, it is out of the state assembly's hands. It's future is up to the Department of City Planning which will first have to certify BFC's land use application. Next the Crown Heights community board will make recommendations to the Borough President and Borough Board. Finally, the City Planning Commission will weigh in. After passing through this dizzying array of checkpoints that few but city bureaucrats and savvy real estate insiders know how to navigate, the development will go before the City Council.

There its fate will ultimately be decided by Councilwoman Laurie Cumbo given City Council's unwritten rule of approving developments provided they are backed by the councilmember representing the district in which they are undertaken. The District 35 representative, a Democrat, has hosted a series of town halls on the Bedford Armory development that have been packed by its opponents. Cumbo says she's against the project as it currently stands but whereas DSA and the Crown Heights Tenants Union are calling for the Armory to become part of a community land trust, Cumbo wants to negotiate.

"The mayor is discussing with me how we can create more low-income housing with this project," Cumbo told me over the phone, noting that the Gov. Andrew Cuomo has also pledged to put \$1.4 billion towards housing in Brooklyn. BFC will receive \$25.1 million worth of tax write-offs for the project and Cumbo wants the city and the state to put up subsidies to help house more low-income Brooklynites at the Armory. "What we're seeing here is the opportunity for the [mayoral] administration, the developer and the governor to come forward to see how we can create the best project possible — vastly different than what's been proposed currently."

Opponents of the project are distrustful of Cumbo's let's-hear-em-out approach. They do not want to negotiate for scraps. She in turn feels her views have been mischaracterized by her opponents.

"I don't see the benefit in not hearing what the deal is before we kill the deal," Cumbo said.

...

THE CONFLICT BETWEEN pragmatic politics embodied by the Democratic politician and her critics to the left is also one that has played out within socialist movements in the past. There were the "sewer socialists" who won hundreds of municipal offices in early 20th Century in America, for instance, who urged their more radical brethren to put aside their revolutionary ideals and concentrate instead on immediate, practical concerns like building public works projects. The German revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg attempted a synthesis of the two poles, which were also present among European socialist groupings. Fighting for reform is a way of building mass power capable of revolution, she contended.

DSA for its part emerged in the early 1980s on the right wing of American socialism, rejecting revolution in favor of a reformist approach. "I share an immediate program with liberals in this

*Continued on page 16*

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## SUPPORTING FAMILIES

# FEMINISTS NEED TO FOCUS ON CHILD CARE

## ONLY ENLIGHTENED PUBLIC POLICY CAN LIFT THIS HUGE BURDEN ON WORKING PARENTS

BY ELIZABETH PALLEY

Reproductive rights were a centerpiece of the massive women's marches throughout the United States and the world, both on Jan. 21, the day after Donald Trump was inaugurated as President, and on International Women's day, March 8. Trump's threat to reproductive rights is real and profound. It is already clear that his choices for federal judges will be heavily influenced by the religious extreme right. However, to move forward, this movement must embrace a broader feminist agenda beyond reproductive rights. It must be intersectional and inclusive and avoid the alienation of women of color that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s.

Child care must be part of this agenda. It should be understood as both a necessary social investment and an issue of labor rights for child-care providers. It has only been through the availability of child care that many women have been able to stay in the paid labor force. However, this has often been accomplished on the backs of poorly paid providers, most of whom are women, and disproportionately women of color. In order to be more inclusive, the new women's movement needs to put concrete universal child-care proposals on its agenda, and fight for better pay and working conditions for providers.

Child care should not be considered "a woman's issue." However, any feminist movement must understand the historical and current role that women play in child rearing, and include child-care support and policies on its agenda. Women with children earn 71% of what fathers earn. Having children affects their treatment in the workforce and without proper support, it is difficult for many women, other than the very rich, to keep jobs. Many families have remained in the middle class solely as a result of a second household additional income, that of a woman. Child care must be available to enable women to work, or many more families will fall into poverty.

Any new movement must also put the needs of child-care workers in the forefront. They are among the lowest-paid people in the U.S.: According to a 2016 report by the University of California at Berkeley's Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, their median wage is less than \$10 an hour, and 46 percent receive public assistance such as Medicaid or food stamps. Pre-kindergarten teachers fare somewhat better, it said, but in general, training, educational support, benefits, and resources for child-care providers are "optional, selective, and sporadic." Only 15 percent receive employer-based health insurance, and even fewer receive pension contributions from their employers. Many of these women face a loss or reduction in health benefits if the Affordable Care Act is revoked. Many have limited or no sick leave.

Dr. Corey Shdaimah and I recently completed focus groups with child-care providers throughout the state of New York. Our research found that most need more financial support. Though we did not ask their incomes, we were struck by the financial challenges that the home-based providers reported. Many were struggling to afford participating in training or to fund fingerprinting of new workers, a federal requirement that can cost between \$50 and \$200.

Immigrants make up a significant percentage of the child-

care and early-education workforce. In New York and California, approximately 40 percent of all child-care workers are immigrants. Nationally, 18 percent of all early care and education providers are. Half of these women work in informal home child-care settings. Many are undocumented. An inclusive feminist agenda must ensure that these women remain safe, receive support for their education, and are fairly paid.

The cost of child care is a huge financial strain for many families. Though proposed tax benefits may help some, they fall far short of addressing the core problem: If we want qualified well-educated people to care for our children, we need to be able to pay them a living wage. We have not been able to find a way to use technology to make child care more productive or cheaper. In order to ensure that parents can afford care and that providers receive a living wage, we as a country need to subsidize child care. This will be expensive, but if we want to be competitive in the future, we need a well-educated public and this education needs to begin early.

Subsidizing child care is not a new idea. In fact, much of the industrialized world provides both child care and health care as a basic right. We could learn from Sweden, France, England, and many other nations. The last time this was considered on a national scale in the United States was in 1971, when President Richard Nixon vetoed a bill that would have created a network of federally funded child-care centers, with low-income parents' payments subsidized. It is time for the feminist movement to add child care to its priorities, and to work toward putting universal child care back on the national agenda.

*Elizabeth Palley, JD, PhD, MSW is a Professor of Social Work at Adelphi University and the co-author of In Our Hands: The Struggle for U.S. Child Care Policy (NYU, 2014).*



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# LIFE IN THE BALANCE

## THE HUMAN BODY HAS BECOME THE BATTLEGROUND OF POLITICAL MEANING, AGAIN

BY NICHOLAS POWERS

“I left the hospital,” she said in jagged breaths. An hour earlier, my girlfriend texted me that she slipped and cut her hand. Friends rushed her to an emergency room but she left before treatment. I was confused and angry. “Why are you walking home in pain,” I asked her.

“I. Can’t. Afford. Another. Bill,” she snapped each word so for me to hear, whether I liked it or not. We met at her apartment and I hugged her as if my body, could bandage her body. It did not stop the hurt. But we tried.

Months later, she got on Obamacare and we almost felt safe. But President Trump tried to take away even that last hope. On the news, we saw him hunched over the Oval Office, pouting as he lost votes. And then he failed. We breathed relief but every time, I see Trump, I think this is the man who put her life at risk.

Trump is the face of a conservative movement that cuts services for people. They failed with Obamacare. They will try again. They will try to cut housing, arts, education, legal services and even food for the elderly. They have a capitalist driven, conservative ideology that values the body to the degree it produces profit. Theirs is in an endless struggle with the people’s ideology, a street-level humanism, where we assume our bodies have value, simply because they are the source of our everyday lives.

The human body is the battleground of political meaning. Is it a natural resource for capitalism? Is it valuable for being a vessel of life? When I got my girlfriend aspirin to numb the pain of her throbbing hand, we were living the answer. Our trustest work in life is to care for each other. Not to be a matrix of money. I asked if she needed anything else. Leaning over, she kissed my forehead and said, “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

### HEALTH SCARE

“We are going to be submitting a plan,” Trump said at his January press conference, “to repeal and replace.” He was talking about Obamacare and glowering at reporters. Watching him on my laptop, I felt a chill like in a movie, when a maniac stares through a window before the horror begins.

Many of us live in a state of fear. One bad fall. One hard illness and we could be rolled on a gurney to a hospital, we’ll be saved but at a cost we can’t pay. Obamacare only protects some of us. If we don’t have it then after treatment, bill after bill comes like weights that pull us into poverty. Out of 325 million citizens, 28.5 million don’t have health insurance. Before Obama’s 2010, Affordable Care Act it was 41 million. And Trump wanted to repeal that. He did not care or believe that 24 more million people would lose health care over the next decade and be one sickness or one injury away from having their lives destroyed.

Even I didn’t know who was vulnerable, until my best friend got sick and his breathing sounded like a swamp. He couldn’t go to a doctor. Or an artist I ad-

mired was injured and unable to dance. She couldn’t go to a hospital. The pain and anxiety they live with are invisible to the Republican narrative of governance which says let the free market distribute health. Or the states. Or any form of universal coverage will add to the nation’s debt. In none of these frames is the focus the care of the body.

The fears of conservatives render our bodily needs invisible. They are afraid of “big government” in the hands of the people, who will use it to redirect the flow of power to the lower classes in the name of citizenship rights. It is why Republicans want to cut Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid. And why they hate Obamacare and tried to repeal it. They believe entitlements create a dependent citizenry whose parasitic bodies feed off the wealthy. In 2012, presidential candidate Mitt Romney said in a meeting with donors, “There are 47 percent of the people ... who are dependent upon government, who believe that they are victims, who believe the government has a responsibility to care for them, who believe that they are entitled to health care, to food, to housing, to you-name-it.”

So even though Trump campaigned as a populist, it was inevitable that as president lacking coherent ideology he would borrow ideas from conservatives. The Heritage Foundation’s *Blueprint for Balance* became his *America First* budget. He planned savage

House in his response to Obama’s 2011 State of the Union. The hammock image is a staple of Ryan’s as is the core idea it represents, bodies are lazy if they are not pushed to work.

In 2017, Rep. Jason Chaffetz (R-Utah) said on CNN about Trump’s dismantling of Obamacare, “Americans have choices. Maybe rather than getting that new iPhone that they just love ... maybe they should invest it in their own health care.” The image of the dumb working class person who thinks with their body and must learn from their own bad decisions, even if it means their health is another trope.

Neither idea, whether that people are prone to be lazy or that they’re dumb and must pay for mistakes with their health are in the earliest theory of capitalism. It’s the exact opposite. In the first chapter of Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*, we see a very different role for the body, it is valued even if it does not labor. It is protected by abundance against want, sickness and age. Smith divides “savage” nations from the “civilized” based on how they treat the vulnerable. Using colonial imagery of Native Americans, he portrays them as, “so miserably poor that from mere want, they are ... reduced to abandoning their infants, their old people, and those afflicted with lingering diseases to be devoured by wild beasts.”

In contrast, Smith exalts “civilized” nations that use

## IS THE BODY A DISPOSABLE RESOURCE FOR CAPITALISM? OR A VESSEL OF LIFE TO BE VALUED?

cuts. No more Obamacare. No more PBS. No more Environmental Protection Agency. Our water and air could become undrinkable, unbreathable. Our free public schools would be chopped up into for-profit private ones. Every day his administration would take something. It was a horror movie made real. We had a slasher in the White House. Obamacare was first and his voters erupted. They filled Republican town halls, holding signs saying not to repeal the Affordable Care Act, telling stories of cancer and accidents and being whisked from the edge of death by a doctor they could not have paid for before.

At the height of the backlash to Trumpcare, he tried to sell it on *Fox News*. During the interview Tucker Carlson said to president Trump, “Counties that voted for you, middle class and working class counties, would do far less well under this bill than the counties that voted for Hillary, the more affluent counties.” Trump nodded and looked at him blankly, not really seeing the people Carlson was talking about. It was if they were invisible. “I know,” Trump muttered, “I know.”

### THE BODY IN CAPITALISM

“We don’t want to turn the safety net into a hammock that lulls able-bodied people into complacency and dependence,” said Paul Ryan, Speaker of the

division of labor to increase wealth so that even though, he writes, “A great many do not labor at all ... the produce of the society is so great...a workman of the lowest order ... may enjoy a greater share of the conveniences of life than it is possible for any savage to acquire.”

The body here is shielded by the society’s wealth from sickness, injury and old age. More importantly, the people have intrinsic value. The goal of a civilized nation is use its economic power to protect the bodies of its citizens, whether they are able to work or not. Wealth is in the service of health.

Smith’s elegant paean to the economy was published in 1776 but even by then the hard material truth of the body in capitalism was sailing across the Atlantic Ocean on British slave ships. In cargo holds, bodies were chained and starved, bodies were split by the lash, bodies were raped and bodies were sold. In 1789, thirteen years after Smith published his treatise, one of the enslaved, Olaudah Equiano, wrote of the Middle Passage. “We were all put under deck ... so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself,” he wrote, “The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror.”

Capitalism was built on disposable bodies. The New World was built on disposable bodies. The United States was built on disposable bodies. Whole families, whole villages thrown into chains and sold, worked to death and thrown away.



Rising from slavery was a toxic culture of racism that “blackened” African bodies with social death, painted them as talking monkeys. They lived at the low point where the disposable body became the black body, a thing of disgust and difference. The concentric rings of racism that crushed people of color became the major barrier to the advance of socialism in the United States. And it was the counter-force of black love for black bodies that is breaking that down and pushing our “savage” nation to become “civilized”.

### THE LIGHT AT THE BOTTOM

Cornelius waves hi and drinks his beer. Face bright with an early morning buzz, he sits in his family’s front yard. They’re my neighbors. When he arrived, his Aunt Dolores said she and her husband took him in because he was sick. And he is. Cornelius has bloated cheeks and he floats in a daze from his medicine. Sometimes, I’ll wave but he won’t see me.

His family cares for him without judgement. In Black America it is tradition to “take someone in” whether escaped slaves in the 19th Century or family coming home from jail today. It can be a sick loved one or a friend lost in life. It is part of Black healing. Alongside doula birth work. Herbs for illness. Touching scars. Touching silence. Releasing it all into song or tears, prophecy or dance. And revolution. At the center were Black women, their limbs, branches of the family tree, lifting as they climbed.

Black people healing black people are a counter-current to capitalism’s ripping of labor from the body. It spins like a wheel, going in the opposite direction of a larger wheel. The friction makes a spark of illumination by which another value for the body can be seen, something beyond the economic, something sacred.

It’s hard to see this light because of America’s blinding whiteness. In 1931, two years into the Great Depression, historian James Adams popularized The American Dream as a “land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each.” Like Adam Smith 155 years before, he exalted a dream of capitalism. Many immigrants bought it. Many profited from it. But the hard truth was the cyclical Wall Street crashes that caused slums to overflow and long soup lines of broken families. Migrants came to build a “civilized” nation but discovered a deeply “savage” one, where Big Government backed by and backing Big Business, made workers into disposable bodies.

Some new Americans climbed up in class and whiteness. Many toiled at the bottom, thrown away. Socialists and labor groups tried to build a “civilized” nation in the rubble of capitalism. But even workers with disposable bodies, saw their interests converge with the elite on race and Cold War patriotism. Each push for social democracy and the redistribution of wealth that would make a generous welfare state possible hit the hard wall of two fears; one was communism the other racial mixing. Roosevelt’s New Deal had to be packaged as “pragmatism” not “socialism”. And to win over Southern Democrats, he excluded black people from some of his most important initiatives. When Truman tried to set up national healthcare, Senator Robert Taft, yelled at him, “I consider it socialism, the most socialistic measure this Congress has ever had before it.”

But the Black counter-current pushed. A people stolen and sold, exploited and segregated, came with their own light, their own dream. When Lyndon Johnson’s Democratic Party reluctantly sided with the civil rights moment, it lost the South as he said, “For a generation” They were branded the party of minorities and social democracy was linked with Black equality. Conservative white, racial resentment over busing, affirmative action and welfare, spilled onto healthcare. Economist Paul Krugman, said in a lecture, “It actually comes down to race. In the advanced world, only the United States fails to guarantee health care ... in 1947, Truman pushed for national healthcare, it was defeated because of a coalition between doctors and Southern white politicians who were afraid that it would force them to integrate their hospitals.”

Fast forward to 2009, conservatives panicked about The Affordable Care Act waved posters with President Obama as a Witch Doctor or Lenin, Stalin or with a Hitler mustache. The two old fears of socialism and racial mixing, fused into one. Against the backdrop of an increasingly diverse America, where minorities could direct big government; Obamacare was seen as a racial threat. It was a paranoid fear that conflated a

Continued on next page



## LIFE IN THE BALANCE

*Continued from previous page*

health insurance reform, not much different than the 1993 Republican Bob Dole-led plan, into the morbid image of “death panels” as a symbol of white genocide.

Here we are in the 21st Century, carrying the weight of the past. Capitalism from the Middle Passage to Middle America has created a mountain range of disposable bodies. It is now catching up to whiteness and throwing that away to. It was inevitable. Class was never separate from race but just a lesser degree of darkness.

We’re stuck together. All of us. Millions of Americans who want a fairer more humane society cheek and jowl with millions of Americans, drunk on race, who clutch the Dream. They walk in a daze. Faces bloated from lack of a future. They are lost like Cornelius. They need a new family. And history may push the Black Freedom Movement beyond saying Black Lives Matter, to seeing all these abandoned souls; knowing, however reluctantly, it may have to take America back in, touch its scars; be its doula, do rebirth work and say, “This is how you heal.”

### THE GREAT DIE IN

“We should have a great die-in,” I told my friend, “Let’s bring our sick and injured to the White House gate. Maybe I’ll get dressed as a Statue of Liberty, limping on a crutch with a bandage around my eye.”

We laughed as subway tunnel lights, flashed in the window. We made a bitter sound. The Republicans were gearing up to kill Obamacare. A fear was tightening in everyone’s chest. He was taking care of a sick father. I was worried about my girlfriend who had a chronic condition that caused hives to break out like itchy bites. Sometimes, she scratched herself bloody.

“Yes, let’s have a die-in,” he stroked his chin, smiled, “Roll people in wheelchairs up. Get folks to waddle as they hold their IV drops. I have an uncle with Parkinson’s, I’ll get him there. Yes, man, I can see it, thousands of sick, laying in front of the White House, vomiting from their treatments, breathing from oxygen masks, actually dying so Trump can see what he’s doing to us, you know, make it real.”

I nodded, feeling our faces lock on the imaginary scene. We wanted for the pain to be open and recog-

nized. Teaching is not enough. Using facts is not enough. No one bothers seeing until they can’t look away.

“How did all this pain become invisible,” I asked out loud to myself, to him, to people in power too far away to hear me, “I mean they’re trying to kill us.”

He closed his eyes and sighed. We left the train and saw a man, no legs, in a wheelchair, holding a cup for spare change. We looked at him then each other but didn’t say a word. Everything was in the silence. Everything always is.

### THE BODY’S MANIFESTO

When they failed, I cheered. They could not repeal Obamacare because too many moderates knew better and too many hard liners were unwilling to compromise. Not enough votes. I saw President Trump on the

hall thinks that citizen also means the Mexican and Muslim, the Black and the openly gay. When they think me and my family and my friends are also part of America. Then our movement will be strong enough to win.

One night, I brought my girlfriend medicine for her hives. In her bedroom, I saw the heavy backpack with student papers from teaching, stacks of books from her graduate classes. Most days, she wakes before sunrise, to travel to New Jersey to teach. She sends me photos from the train. In the background, I see so many tired, beleaguered faces snoozing in the seats.

Every day, she works. Most people, work. We make the world’s wealth but are cut off from it. The division of labor goes into the laborer, dividing us from our bodies, until we have to buy back our lives. It leaves us tired. Whatever this is, it is not the Dream.

“What are you thinking,” she asked. I chewed my lip (before answering), “I want to burn the system down.”

**WHEN WHITES ACCEPT PEOPLE UNLIKE THEMSELVES AS FELLOW AMERICANS, OUR MOVEMENT WILL BE STRONG ENOUGH TO WIN HEALTH CARE FOR ALL.**

news. He was at the Oval Office, eyes snarled then looking down, then waving his hands as if tearing at spider webs. He was blaming everyone but himself for his failure. Typical.

This is the struggle for the next four years. We will be marching, protesting, making noise all to protect our bodies from cuts. There will cuts to our health, our education, our culture, our future.

Unlike conservatives, the left is trying to recreate from a “savage” nation, a “civilized” one. When we march with signs or rally or block traffic or organize, we are showing the millions of other Americans that our bodies are not disposable.

It is catching on. Recently, Bernie Sanders held a nationally televised town hall in West Virginia where people told stories of addiction and loss, fear and sickness. He asked a coal miner who voted for Trump if he thought America should have national health care. The man, awkward in the sincere way of someone not used to cameras said, “I think every American citizen should have healthcare” and the crowd roared its approval.

We can get there when he and everyone in that town

She took out her oils, smudged some on her forehead. She had a whole self-care regime. She was proud of her Black woman magic.

She said, “We were never meant to survive here. They tried to kill us so many times. They never cared for our bodies. But we did. We know how to survive them. When you know that then you’re good. Nothing to fear.”

In her beautiful face was the face of America, the African and Native and European, blended together. I massaged the scars from her surgery. I massaged the scars from our history. She looked at them and said, “Those are 400 years of stitching, holding it all together.”

*Nicholas Powers is a professor of African American literature at SUNY-Old Westbury and the author of The Ground Beneath Zero (Upset Press, 2013).*

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# 'THE GREATEST JOBS PRODUCER GOD EVER CREATED'

## TRUMP'S TRILLION DOLLAR INFRASTRUCTURE PLAN COULD BE HIS BIGGEST CON YET

BY PETER RUGH

Last March, as news of the lead-poisoned water supply in Flint, Michigan made national headlines, Christopher Cerf, the newly appointed superintendent of the Newark, New Jersey school district, ordered faucets in his school district tested for the presence of lead, a neurotoxin that can cause learning disabilities and behavioral problems in children. When the results came in, Cerf ordered water shut off in 30 of his district's 67 schools. Statewide testing found that the water in 88 school buildings in 30 districts contained levels of lead that surpassed the 15-parts-per-billion limit set by the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The American Society of Pediatrics considers no amount of lead safe for children.

Fixing the contamination in Newark alone will require "billions of dollars of infrastructure repair and that's going to take decades," David Pringle, a public health expert with the New Jersey chapter of Clean Water Action, told *The Independent*. "No meaningful source of funding has been identified for that and I have zero expectation that [Gov. Chris Christie] is going to do anything."

Lead-tainted water is not limited to New Jersey or Flint. A 2016 *USA Today* investigation found that since 2012, water systems serving 6 million Americans had contained lead levels above the EPA safety standard. "Many of the highest reported lead levels were found at schools and day cares," the paper reported. "A water sample at a Maine elementary school was 42 times higher than the EPA limit of 15 [ppb], while a Pennsylvania preschool was 14 times higher, records show. At an elementary school in Ithaca, [New York], one sample tested this year at a stunning 5,000 ppb of lead, the EPA's threshold for 'hazardous waste.'"

Small wonder then that this March, the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) gave the country's drinking water a grade of D in its 2017 infrastructure report card. In fact, nearly every grade on ASCE's report card would guarantee an ass-whooping from Mama. Dams: D. Levees: D. Aviation, roads, inland waterways: D, D and D. Wastewater: D+.

Clearly there is a lot of room for improvement, but some infrastructure projects are sexier than others. A huge, beautiful bridge, for instance, will make an enticing photo opportunity for a certain overgrown Richie Rich president prone to tacking his name on skylines. A glass of clean tap water, on the other hand, while perhaps small enough to make said president's hands look bigly, isn't quite as awe-inspiring. Besides, over at Mar-a-Lago, they can afford 24-karat bottles of Acqua di Cristallo.

Following up on a campaign pledge, Donald Trump told Congress on Feb. 28 that he plans to send lawmakers a \$1 trillion infrastructure bill — half of what ASCE expects it would cost to fix and modernize everything from our big, sexy bridges to our water systems. But, hey, it's a start. Other recent events have also highlighted the need for some national home improvements, notably the near-hemorrhage at the Oroville Dam in Northern California

in February. Trump press secretary and shill Sean Spicer called the threat at Oroville a "textbook example" of the need for infrastructure improvements.

A \$1 trillion investment would help make good on Trump's repeated assertions that he will be "the greatest jobs producer that God ever created." But here's where Trump's populist pose (not to mention the habit of raiding public coffers he developed as a real-estate mogul) meets the constant Republican desire to shaft the poor.

First, there's the matter of coming up with the trillion dollars. The White House wants to boost the Pentagon's budget by \$54 billion, at the expense of just about every other government department. The proposal, drafted by White House budget director Mick Mulvaney — who sifted through footage of Trump's campaign speeches for guidance rather than consulting with the president directly — has even proven too harsh for members of Trump's own party.

Economic development commissions that steer millions of dollars to Appalachia, the Midwest and the South are on the chopping block, as are grants from the Department of Housing and Urban Development and a \$3.4 billion job training program managed by the Department of Labor — all of which, it turns out, are dear to the hearts of fiscally conservative red-state governors who rely on the federal assistance.

Some of them are complaining loudly. According to the *New York Times*, the message they've received back from the White House so far is "We'll get back to you on that."

"They're cutting all sorts of infrastructure projects and economic-development projects at the same time that the president is still talking about how much of an investment he's going to put into infrastructure," the nonpartisan Tax Policy Center's Kim Rueben observed.

So where's the infrastructure money going to come from? The answer is: Nowhere. Trump's plan, as it exists, relies entirely on tax incentives to private companies.

"The scheme offers a tax credit to private investors covering 82 percent of their equity investment costs," the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) noted in an analysis of the infrastructure plan Trump's campaign released in October, the most recent to date. "Investors would cover the remaining 18 percent but would receive all the profits, effectively privately owning and operating the projects and charging the public to use them."

Furthermore, as the CBPP report highlights, there is no mandate in the Trump plan to ensure that the tax breaks would actually go toward new infrastructure, instead of subsidizing projects that were already in the works or that would have been undertaken anyway. Nor are there stipulations directing improvements to communities who need them most, or toward sorely needed projects like lead abatement in New Jersey that would not yield high returns on investments.

"The plan," it said, "has no mechanism to ensure that

infrastructure projects flow to communities already underserved by infrastructure investment — to towns that have lost a major employer, rural communities lacking easy access to amenities, and low-income communities that lack basic necessities such as clean water. Instead, the investments likely would flow much more heavily to higher-income, more developed communities where investors are more assured of ongoing income streams."

In short, the plan is a massive giveaway to the rich disguised as a jobs program. It "more closely resembles a licensing scheme, in which the government will try to incentivize companies to build privatized infrastructure, with a shiny Trump seal of approval slapped on the side," as Pat Garofalo put it for *U.S. News and World Report*.

The deeper problem with Trump's infrastructure plans, according to Gerald Epstein, a liberal economist at the University of Massachusetts, is that it is a method of building upon the proto-fascist social formation that Trump represents. Epstein calls it "Schacht therapy," after Hjalmar Schacht, Adolf Hitler's minister of economics from 1934 to 1937.

Schacht therapy "is a set of economic policies that might result in short-term economic expansion and job creation," Epstein wrote recently, "but are designed to strengthen the power of repressive, authoritarian, rac-

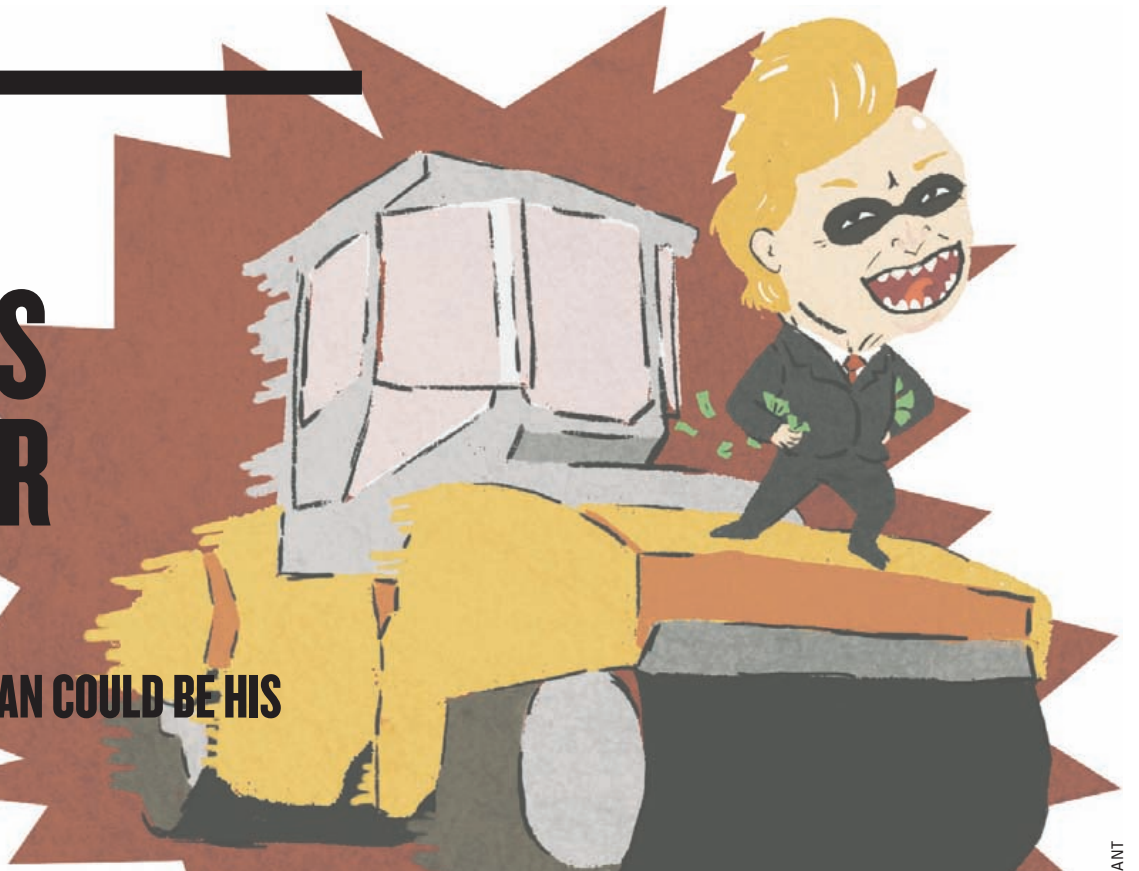
## TRUMP'S POPULIST POSE MEETS THE CONSTANT REPUBLICAN DESIRE TO SHAFT THE POOR.

ist, misogynist, homophobic, anti-leftist, and nationalistic/militaristic policies. . . It combines repression and authoritarianism with the promotion of those business interests that cooperate with the power system."

Trump's infrastructure scheme, is "going to pay a few crumbs to some workers," Epstein told *The Indy*, particularly those whose work is in construction. But "Trump's ultimate goal is to get them to support his broader political aims — throwing immigrants out, dividing one religion from another, expanding the military and increasing militarism."

"I'm sure he's going to disappoint in terms of what he's going to deliver, in terms of real economic benefits over the longer term," said Epstein. "There could be a short-term increase in economic growth which looks like it's working if he has this big military build-up, this big tax-cut program. It will seem to some people, including his base, that perhaps all this is working great. But it's all going to come crashing down, because it's not based on dealing with the real needs of the U.S. economy or of his base. It's just going to deliver massive amounts of wealth

*Continued on the next page*



MICHAEL GRANT



## INFRASTRUCTURE

*Continued from previous page*

to his cronies.”

In New Jersey, Gov. Chris Christie, a staunch Trump ally, initially downplayed the state’s drinking-water crisis, but caved to public pressure and offered \$20 million toward a fix. The money will revitalize an abatement fund originally established to address lead contamination, one that the governor has raided over the years.

There are a number of solutions that could address the contamination, according to Clean Water Action’s David Pringle: installing filters on pipes (and, as Newark failed to do, maintaining them) or adding chemical solvents to the water to dilute the lead. Yet there is only one long-term solution: Removing the source of the contamination by replacing old pipes.

“There’s no reason to think Newark is going to come up with the money on their own to fund this,” said Pringle.

Some Republicans are attempting to paper over the lack of actual funding for infrastructure in Trump’s budget by turning their psychotic drive to eliminate government regulations up a notch.

“It’s not going to be \$1 trillion coming out of Washington, D.C.,” Rep. Bill Shuster (R-Pa.), who chairs the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, told the *Associated Press* on Mar. 1. “There are billions and billions of dollars out there today, private-sector dollars, that are going to be spent.”

Rep. Shuster cited the Constitution and Atlantic Sunrise pipelines, which, respectively, will carry natural gas fracked in Pennsylvania’s Marcellus Shale region to New York State and to a new export terminal at Cove Point in Maryland. Both have been delayed due to hurdles obtaining water permits from environmental regulators and the Army Corps of Engineers.

“If the Corps signs off, and we get a couple of other people in agreement, we’re talking about \$4 billion just in Pennsylvania and a couple of other states that can be done,” he claimed.

Robert Bea, professor emeritus of civil engineering at the University of California at Berkeley, a former Shell Oil executive and one of the world’s leading experts on catastrophic-risk management, worries that Trump’s proposed federal budget is dangerously shortsighted when it comes to guarding U.S. infrastructure against future environmental risks. It’s not just the EPA that’s on the chopping block. The budget would also eliminate the U.S. Chemical Safety Board, impose steep cuts to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and allocate nothing for the National Science Foundation.

“He’s effectively erasing the advanced

ways we have to determine what needs to be changed for public safety,” Bea told *The Indy*. Climate change “should factor in directly” with all infrastructure investments. “If you build infrastructure systems that eventually or quickly degrade the natural environment, you’ve got a big problem.”

He compares Trump to Lord John Brown, who ran BP prior to the 2010 Deepwater Horizon disaster. Blinded by his drive to increase profits, Brown failed to heed concerns raised by Bea and his colleagues about the safety of the company’s offshore oil-drilling operations in the Gulf of Mexico in the years leading up to the Deepwater Horizon blowout that killed 11 workers and released hundreds of millions of gallons of crude oil into the ocean. “I looked at him and said, ‘You’re screwed,’” said Bea, recalling a meeting in 2000 with the BP executive.

The full scope of Trump’s infrastructure hoax might not be fully felt until long after Trump retires, loses continence and is being spoon-fed his meals by a big-chested nurse. The effect of human-induced global warming is already upon us, but flooding, droughts and superstorms will only intensify in the decades ahead. The tragic irony is

**INVESTORS  
WOULD COVER  
18 PERCENT OF  
THE COSTS BUT  
WOULD RECEIVE  
ALL THE PROFITS.**

that addressing the problem now with direct government investment would be far more effective than throwing tax incentives at private companies in the hopes of spurring a building orgy.

“There have been lots of studies that show there is no tradeoff between generating jobs and fighting climate change,” said UMass’s Gerald Epstein. “The best way to generate jobs is by investing in renewable energy. It could generate millions of jobs. If we don’t do that, we’re threatening livelihoods. We saw that in New York City with Hurricane Sandy, to say nothing of what will happen in other major cities and communities all over the world. The real way to make the U.S. economy get going again is to have a massive investment plan for renewable energy.”

In the meantime, parents and their kids in Newark and across New Jersey would settle for a clean glass of water.

## DSA

*Continued from page 9*

country because the best liberalism leads toward socialism,” the late social critic and author Michael Harrington, a founding member of DSA, once put it.

“It’s a different world today than the one Harrington was living in,” said Dustin Guastella, a member of the Steering Committee for DSA’s Philadelphia chapter. “It was a world where liberals signed on to the [1963] March on Washington, which raised demands that people forget were really radical. It called for real radical economic change, in particular. [March organizers] A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin were socialists. They were pushing for a huge increase in the minimum wage, industrial democracy. Liberals agreed to that at that time. Today, we’re having a hard time getting liberals to sign on to Medicare-for-all, something that was once unimpeachably considered a liberal perspective is now an anathema to many of these folks.”

Largely unaccountable to the it’s rank-and-file supporters, the Democratic Party leadership has drifted toward the center-right and become highly technocratic while simultaneously de-emphasizing politics to voters. A *Vox* analysis of Hillary Clinton’s campaign advertisements in the 2016 presidential campaign, for instance, found that they were almost entirely free of any specific policy proposals.

Bernie Sanders’ primary challenge, by contrast, ignited interest around socialist ideas like free higher education and universal health insurance — actual leftwing policies that mobilized millions of younger voters in the party.

“We fight for what the left has historically fought for, which is mass, democratic organizations that can hold people accountable, where people pay dues and are actually part of the organizing, so it’s not just you receive a couple of emails telling you to donate to the DNC,” said Guastella.

And he doesn’t just want to convince liberals either.

“The goal is to win over everybody,” he said. “I grew up in extremely conservative household and I became a socialist. A lot of folks think that the ideological spectrum is such that you have to win over people who are closest to you and liberals are closer to us. But I think if we put forward a strong program, put forward strong politics, put forward good organizing we can win conservatives over just as much as we can win over liberals.”

In Philly, DSA members are following the same track as the their counterparts in Brooklyn, turning their organizational growth towards class struggle. Guastella and his comrades have joined a campaign with National Nurses United to push for a single payer health care system in Pennsylvania. That might seem like an outlandish demand given the health care discussions dominating Washington, D.C. these days but it is one that attracted millions of voters to Sanders, even ones that eventually

voted for Trump.

DSA is vetting a new crop candidates to run at local and state levels across the country in 2017 and 2018. DSA candidates will mostly compete in Democratic primaries but the organization is open to pushing their politics independently. In Brooklyn, Jabari Brisport is running in the 35th Council district as a Green against Laurie Cumbo and another Democratic Party regular. The expectation is that its grassroots activism will propel socialists into office or, at the very least, the electoral campaigns will rally voters to engage deeper with socialist politics, in the same way the Sanders campaign did.

“It is really powerful in a kind of circular way,” said Amelia Dornbush, who serves on DSA’s electoral committee in New York. “Electoral work is a way to further local issues like the Bedford Army but also raise awareness of what’s happening in communities. It’s not either electoral or issue-based campaigns. The two can really work in tandem. We’ve been having people out canvassing around the Bedford Army ask people, ‘Hey, are you registered to vote? Do you know that City Council races are coming up?’”

The strategy has its pitfalls, however.

“We need to connect with people and obviously elections are a great way to do it,” said Bhaskar Sunkara. “But there is the trap of electoralism. That we orient our organization more and more towards running candidates and that we conservatize our politics to fit what is possible and the status quo. We’re trying to create an opposition movement that will create a new set of politics. We’re not necessarily trying to write legislation in the here and now because we’re trying to change the condition in which legislation is written.”

Sunkara thinks activists should take the long view towards socialism. He doesn’t want people to be discouraged if victories are few and far between — a likely prospect not just given who occupies the White House but because socialism seeks to turn the existing social order on its head. Still, change is fluid. “There are years that seem like decades and days that seem like years,” Sunkara said.





## DAWN OF THE SOCIAL THRILLER

*Get Out*  
DIRECTED BY JORDAN PEELE  
104 MINUTES, RATED R

By Mark Read

In the first ten minutes of *Get Out*, writer/director Jordan Peele flips the script on the Hollywood trope that has echoed and reinforced white fears of black men for generations, from D.W. Griffith through Lena Dunham. How many films have shown that scared (or oblivious) white woman (or sometimes a man) walking through a “bad” neighborhood, past a gauntlet of hostile black gazes? Or maybe it’s a desolate, empty maze of streets, with the implied lurking presence of dangerous and criminal black or brown men. The specter of black-on-white violence, set within the disintegrating urban core, is stock Hollywood fodder. As a white audience member, I have been coached since childhood to empathize with that fearful and clueless potential victim.

The opening scene of *Get Out* turns all this on its head, convincingly and chillingly. A black man wanders lost at night in suburban America. He is on the phone with a friend or lover, agitated and panicky, creeped out. His fear is palpable, and surprisingly (for this white man at least) relatable. Relating to him caught me off guard. That’s the crux of what I see as the political work of the film. What does it say about how our culture has shifted for this scene and this movie to be so popular? It was the top-grossing film in the United States the weekend it opened in February, and

more than 14 million people had bought tickets within three weeks.

For me, the opening scene’s credibility and power stem from the work of the Black Lives Matter movement’s activists and the cultural conversation that they have sparked. (As well as the work of generations of black activists, such as journalist Ida B. Wells’ 1890s crusade against lynching.) As a storyteller, Peele is able to take us places that news stories and memoirs can’t reach, deeper into the psychological and emotional truth of a situation. However, the hard work of activists has produced a wider understanding of the underlying reality, setting the scene for a film like *Get Out* to be as well received as it has been.

That first scene sets the stage and does the important work of generating overall empathy, but the tone quickly shifts, and then shifts again and again. This film is a shape-shifting, genre-bending tour-de-force. The first act feels like just another intelligent, well-written romantic comedy, with the political subtext of race relations to give it some depth. An interracial couple, Chris (Daniel Kaluuya) and Rose (Allison Williams of “Girls” fame), goes to meet her white parents. Awkwardness and hilarity ensue, as one would expect. It’s painful, but retains a sense of humor.

It then veers into more stock horror-movie territory. Something wicked lies below the surface, something menacing and deeply creepy. And it’s coming to get you. Peele intends to frighten us the way that any good horror movie does, and he

fully succeeds, just as he had been succeeding with a politically edgy rom-com a little earlier.

The film’s horror comes with a smirk and a nod, however. It pivots back toward comedy through the tropes of the buddy film. Chris’ best friend, Rod, played by scene-stealing comedian Lil Rel Howery, desperately attempts to convince the police of the dangerous situation that Chris is in, delivering big laughs just as the story is hurtling toward its grisly conclusion. The surreal adventure rides all these genre tracks simultaneously due to some truly adept writing and directing, but ultimately comedy trumps horror. Peele is a comedian, after all.

Humor, of course, is a primary strategy for revealing and commenting upon difficult truths in a way that’s approachable to a wide (and/or white) audience. If done well, it enables people to be open to ideas that, if shared in a different way, might feel like an attack. It enables us to maintain emotional distance from something that might be too painful to look at directly. Jordan Peele is an adept enough comedic writer to expose the painful realities of black people living under white supremacy without pulling any punches, but in a way that whites can take it in.

This year, we have heard much from Hollywood-celebrity award winners about the importance of empathy and the role that films play in generating it. While it’s pretty easy to be cynical about the self-congratulatory Hollywood liberal elite, they do have a point, and this film is an example. It’s meaningful to me that I was in some small way able

to experience, by way of imagination and empathy, what it might be like to be that guy, walking around in an unfamiliar white suburb, knowing that if a cop comes by they will probably assume something about me that isn’t true, and how those assumptions could put my life in jeopardy. Or maybe it’ll just be some paranoid suburban dude with a gun, or some teenage guy with something to prove. Who knows what’s coming, right?

This shouldn’t be trivialized. The basic building blocks for solidarity are empathy and mutual interest. If we can’t feel the former, we probably won’t see the latter. Empathy, or the lack of it, has real political consequences that we shouldn’t sneer at. Jordan Peele has given us a terrifically funny and popular film that does some really interesting and important political-cultural work. Bravo!



## L.A. KAUFFMAN GETS THE GOODS

*Direct Action: Protest and the Reinvention of American Radicalism*

By L.A. KAUFFMAN  
VERSO BOOKS, 2017

By Steven Sherman

“**W**hole bookshelves groan under the weight of histories of the sixties, and both the old left and the new left have been extensively studied,” organizer and journalist L.A. Kauffman states at the beginning of her new book, *Direct Action: Protest and the Reinvention of American Radicalism*, “yet, while significant waves of activism have punctuated the history of the last forty years, the story of American radicalism in recent decades remains almost untold.”

*Direct Action* seeks to remedy this situation partially by focusing on one major strand of radicalism in this period — the disruptive but basically non-violent style of protest epitomized by the blockading of the World Trade Organization summit in Seattle in 1999. On these terms, the book is clearly a success, and activists attempting to understand their own history and the strengths and weaknesses of this tradition will return to it time and again.

Kauffman begins her story in 1971, describing the largely forgotten May Day protests against the Vietnam War, which converged on Washington, D.C. to shut down the federal government. A sort of response to the Weather Underground — an effort to be as disruptive as their bombing campaign, but in a nonviolent manner that could better include widespread participation — it failed to “stop the government,” as 14,000 protesters were pre-emptively arrested, but did intensify pressure on the Nixon administration to end the war. The action’s approach owed more to anarchist thought and practice — from which it drew the idea of affinity groups — than to socialist practice. Civil-rights movement veterans mobilized to support detained activists, representing something of a passing of the disruptive-protest baton from a generation exhausted by government repression to a new tendency.

She continues by describing a series of high points over the next 40 years, including the Clamshell Alliance’s sit-ins at the Seabrook nuclear-power plant in New Hampshire, the protests at the 1984 Republican convention in Dallas, ACT UP, the South Africa divestment movement, Earth First!, the “Battle of Seattle,” Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter. Care is given to outlining the precursors, mood, tactics and dilemmas each faced. This sort of describes an arc, as the revolutionary dreams of the early 1970s give way to a more internally focused, defensive posture in the later ’70s and the ’80s, and then growing confidence leading up to Seattle.

The aftermath of 9/11 drove disruptive dissent off the streets, but it returned with Occupy Wall Street and then Black Lives Matter, in some ways stronger than ever. Several threads run through this narrative. The book notes the central role of queer, in particular lesbian, activists, throughout this period. A more nonpolitical or antipolitical focus early on — such as the tendency to zoom in on the immediate needs of people living with HIV or defense of the environment outside of a larger political framework — eventually gives way to a tendency to see commonalities in struggles and the potential for larger-scale radical change. Above all, the challenge of the racial segregation of this part of the left looms large. Kauffman sees the earlier movements as more inept at posing this question and responding to it, but depicts some progress by the time of Occupy and in particular Black Lives Matter, an African American-led movement supported and informed by direct-action stalwarts.

There are some unfortunate exclusions. The mobilization of thousands of activists to New Orleans to support Hurricane Katrina recovery efforts under the aegis of the Common Ground Collective is not mentioned at all, although it probably represented the most prominent direct-action mo-

bilization between the start of the Iraq War and Occupy Wall Street, and as it was largely white activists taking leadership from an African American group, would have fit in well with the narrative.

Similarly, the U.S. Social Forum of 2007 and 2010, spearheaded by mostly non-white groups but attracting participation from considerable numbers of the sort of activists Kauffman is describing, is not mentioned. And Occupy Oakland, the one Occupy encampment where Black Bloc tactics were not marginalized, is also absent. Occupy Oakland was one of the largest and most militant of the movement’s occupations, and its proponents typically said its roots were in the response to the 2009 police shooting of Oscar Grant, again linking it to non-white struggles.

Although she handles the question

**RISE UP:** Despite a furious police response, thousands of nonviolent protesters succeeded in shutting down downtown Seattle on Nov. 30, 1999. The action helped derail corporate-backed trade talks being held by the World Trade Organization and became a milestone in the development of an increasingly bold and confident direct action tendency on the U.S. left.

the movement. But they are relevant nevertheless for building effective mass movements. These are, however, quibbles, as Kauffman has drawn a vivid narrative in its own right.

After the election of Donald Trump, it is difficult to not feel that the terrain of protests has changed dramatically. For a time, it made sense to debate intensely about how to have an effective spokescouncil that would incorporate ideas from all the affinity groups, or how to lock down an intersection near an International Monetary Fund meeting. Direct action also often seemed the best strategy, in a time of politi-

## THE STORY OF AMERICAN RADICALISM IN RECENT DECADES HAS GONE UNTOLD — UNTIL NOW

of race well throughout, she doesn’t comment on this movement’s other demographic limitations. One is the question of class. How many of the blockaders of the WTO were not college-educated (to take one way of identifying class), aside from the union members who broke from the union-sanctioned march to join the blockade? I suspect not many.

A second question centers on geography. Like the Democratic Party vote, the direct-action tendency is highly concentrated: Almost all the actions cited here took place in a handful of metropolitan areas and around prestigious universities. On the other hand, Occupy Wall Street showed some signs of breaching these limitations during its brief heyday.

These questions are not addressed, I suspect, because they have never had much prominence in debates within

cal isolation, to get the goods such as testing of new AIDS drugs. Since November 8, 2016, the question of who is sitting in positions of power, and the fundamental direction of U.S. society, looms larger than ever.

These questions are likely to insert themselves into even the most localized protest, not just major mobilizations. How and whether the direct-action tendency, responsible for some of the most creative and high-impact movements and protests of the last 40 years, will respond to this new terrain remains to be seen.



STEVE KAISER



## PHOTOGRAPHY



## THROUGH THE LENS OF REVOLT

*Perpetual Revolution: The Image and Social Change*  
INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR PHOTOGRAPHY  
250 BOWERY  
Through May 7

By Gena Hymowech

When photographer Cornell Capa founded the International Center of Photography in 1974, there was no way he could have anticipated the world we live in today — one in which every person has the chance to be a photojournalist and/or documentary filmmaker; video, text and images are shared at the touch of a button; and the audience is (potentially) always watching. This is a monumental shift. It changes who gets to tell the story, who gets to access it, how factual the story is, how quickly news travels and even how we think and express ourselves. (Hello, memes and hashtags!)

Yet even with all this change, so many of us still want the same things people wanted in 1974, like peace and justice. Capa's aim was to make ICP a place that would, as its website tells us, "preserve the legacy of 'concerned photography'" — in other words, photography that has the chance to teach and inspire change on both a social and political level. Images, of course, still have the potential to do that. That's one thing that has not changed.

"Perpetual Revolution: The Image and Social Change" meets Capa's original goal while appealing to modern audiences. It holds up a mirror to our current world and the new ways we make and consume media. "Perpetual Revolution" can be interpreted to mean that revolution never sleeps in the age of the Internet, but I believe revolution is perpetual as long as people are dissatisfied. And while people can be dissatisfied no matter what, technology can make people more dissatisfied, or

spark new dissatisfaction, because of how it opens a window to possibility.

As you might expect, much of what this exhibit shows is not very pretty, but if you want to change the world, you first must

learn what the problems are. You must get deeply uncomfortable, and then you must get angry. So, unlike much art, this exhibit is not a tonic for stress and depression. If anything, it will probably make you feel worse, but, on the positive side, it will also remind you of the unbreakable strength of human beings.

One of the first things you will notice is a NASA video called *Climate Time Machine: Global Temperature*. It illustrates, via color animation, how global surface temperature has evolved from 1880 through 2016 — global warming's fury clearly emerging in a violent blood-red. It is a real-life horror film, and the scariest part is we still don't know the ending. What is clear is that we have been sleeping on the job.

The exhibit also includes a powerful *Democracy Now!* clip from when company security guards attacked the water protectors trying to stop construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline in North Dakota (*Dakota Access Pipeline Company Attacks Native American Protesters with Dogs & Pepper Spray*, September 3, 2016). Despite the chaotic and dangerous atmosphere, reporter Amy Goodman stays calm and gets her story, while the protesters bravely fight for the land. This is five-star reporting that is impossible to look away from.

The section titled The Flood: Refugees and Representation shows images of refugees trying to cross the Mediterranean to Europe, a journey in which more than 5,000 drowned last year. *New York Times* photographer Daniel Etter cap-

tured a stunning, Pulitzer Prize-winning moment from 2015: Iraqi refugee Laith Majid crying and holding his kids after they have finally gotten to Kos, a Greek island. Who knows how many times he worried his boat would go down? It is enough to make you weep too.

From there we go downstairs — the exhibit covers two floors — to The Fluidity of Gender. Queer progress is proudly, loudly, fiercely on display in videos, on magazine covers and online. The collection shows how crucial the last few years have been for the trans and gender non-conforming communities, and the importance of controlling the way you are portrayed instead of having someone else do it for you.

And while it got better, there's still a lot of crap the trans community has to deal with. Kristen P. Lovell's *Trans in Media* video focuses on the routine murder and exploitation of trans folks. One generally thinks of "Saturday Night Live" as being pro-queer, but there is a stunning piece of anti-trans garbage in this piece. Lovell's other video, *The Tipping Points*, features famous trans people — Laverne Cox, Jazz Jennings and Caitlyn Jenner. (The title likely comes from that famous *Cox Time Magazine* cover.) Taken together, these videos show a lot about privilege in a marginalized community. Cox, Jennings and Jenner have faced struggles, for sure, but are less likely, I believe, to wind up in the dangerous situations the average trans woman might find herself in. Eight trans women of color were murdered in just the first three months of 2017.

Men of color are, of course, also at risk of being killed. Black Lives (Have Always) Mattered is housed in a too-small room that does not allow for the broad exploration the subject warrants. Sheila Pree Bright's video, *#1960Now: Art + Intersec-*

*Refugees arrive by a Turkish boat near the village of Skala, on the Greek Island of Lesbos, November 16, 2015*  
Digital image, 9 monitors  
Original photograph © Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times.

tion, tackles the response to the killing of Philando Castile in Minnesota last year, but the lack of audio weakens the effect.

Terror of a different sort can be found in Propaganda and the Islamic State. It is overwhelming to process all the videos in this section, and you may not have much motivation to understand such viciousness, at least if you are anything like me. For the sake of journalism, I viewed *Eid al-Fitr in the City of Ar-Raqqa*, a video which looks like a Norman Rockwell illustration come to life, or a fun night at Coney Island. The jihadi sees himself much differently than we do.

The Right-Wing Fringe and the 2016 Election is, like the Black Lives Matter section, a lost opportunity. You'll see status updates from Trump and the alt-right projected on a wall. If you don't get enough of that on Twitter or Facebook, then, by all means, knock yourself out.

Visiting this exhibition is akin to going to an antique store run by a hoarder. You have to do a lot of searching to get to the treasures. It would take a week, maybe more, to consume everything here. That doesn't mean you should skip it. In fact, I would go so far as to say you can't afford NOT to see it: If you have been sleeping, this will wake you up. And if you already consider yourself awake, it might still give you a Red Bull jolt you didn't even know you needed.



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## BOOKS

# GROWTH SPUTTERS TO A CRAWL

*The Rise and Fall of American Growth*  
BY ROBERT J. GORDON  
PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS 2016

By Bennett Baumer

**D**arkness defined the American home prior to the electric light bulb. It was pork and corn for breakfast, lunch and supper (at least in Southern homes) before the rise of industrial processed-food manufacturers that delivered goods in refrigerated trucks. Before tractors and washing machines, people worked until they dropped farming with horses and scrubbing clothes by hand. In winter, running to the outhouse and sitting around a hot stove trying to keep warm were the norm before indoor plumbing and central heating.

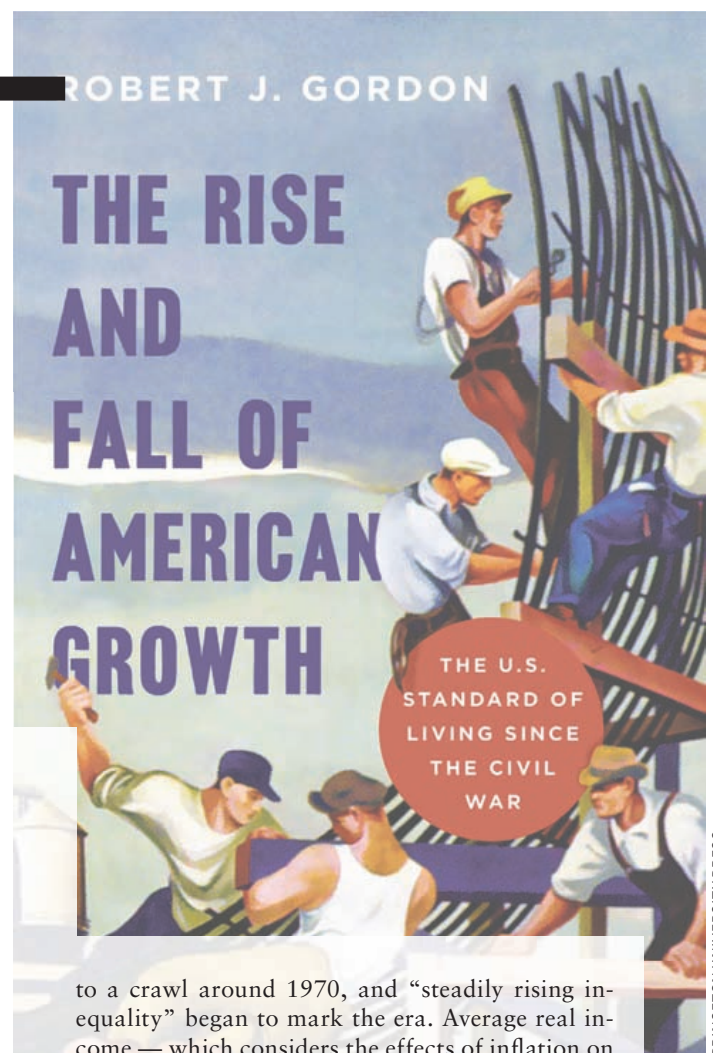
Before the U.S. industrialized after the Civil War, economist Robert Gordon writes in *The Rise and Fall of American Growth*, its economic growth measured about “6 percent per century.” In contrast, when the economy geared up for World War II in 1943 and 1944, the gross domestic product more than doubled each year. Gordon’s main thesis in this expansive book is that innovations drove growth, most innovations have already occurred and the United States is now in a slow-growth period.

*The Rise and Fall of American Growth* chronicles the rise in quality of life in great detail, although not all improvements are captured in GDP statistics. Though the Sears catalog included only sinks in 1897, Gordon notes, by 1908 it offered several full sets of bathroom equipment, including “a clawfoot bathtub, a porcelain-enameled sink, and a toilet. . . with its ‘golden oak’ tank and set. The entire three-part outfit cost only \$43.80, equal to about three weeks’ working-class income at the time.”

Gordon posits that the Industrial Revolution (steam engines, railroads, the first factories) was in fact only the first of three revolutions. By the mid-20th century, rural and urban Americans were networked into telephone lines, sewers, water pipes and electrical poles. This networking allowed for a great leap in quality of life and constituted a second industrial revolution that broadly shared prosperity and fueled growth, generally known as the “American Dream.” The postwar boom created consumer culture, as Americans bought suburban bungalows and filled them with kitchen appliances, Detroit-made cars and mass-produced clothing from department stores.

Since 1960, the invention of the computer, Internet and smartphones has powered the third industrial revolution — but it has not delivered the overall economic growth of the second industrial revolution. It may have changed communications, news delivery and computations so fast that Intel cofounder Gordon Moore predicted exponential growth — a doubling of microchip density every 18 months for the foreseeable future. *The Rise and Fall of American Growth* notes that Moore’s Law did not hold. Despite rapid technological advances, the third industrial revolution’s productivity growth stalled around 2004.

Capitalism is predicated on perpetual future growth, yet Gordon determines that the U.S. economy’s growth slowed



to a crawl around 1970, and “steadily rising inequality” began to mark the era. Average real income — which considers the effects of inflation on purchasing power — for the bottom 90 percent of the population was higher in 1972 than it was in 2013. Occupy Wall Street drew attention to the spectacular wealth accumulation by the “1 per-

cent” — yet, Gordon writes, “even within the top 1 percent, income gains are much faster the higher one rises into the stratosphere of the top 0.1 percent and the top .01 percent,” the people French economist Thomas Piketty calls “super managers.” Moreover a working paper released in December by Piketty and fellow economists Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman showed that even the top 10 percent income earners had only seen wage growth because of public spending on benefits such as health care.

Like Piketty’s seminal economic tome, *Capital*, Gordon theorizes that inequality will be a permanent fixture for the near future, and possibly long-term. He identifies four headwinds blowing against greater equality: deepening overall income inequality; crumbling public education and the declining fortunes of people with only a high-school education; declining labor-force participation, amplified as baby-boomers retire; and perhaps more controversially, government debt and unfunded pension-fund liabilities, coupled with tax cuts reducing government wealth redistribution.

Those four headwinds helped blow the country into the arms of the Trump administration, which is likely to exacerbate the already deep inequality. Trump won the electoral vote with narrow victories in Rust Belt states, where he’d promised to bring back the manufacturing jobs that provided the second industrial revolution’s living standards — but then staffed his cabinet with billionaires and multimillionaires. The Republican-controlled federal government is poised to dismantle the meager remnants of the social safety net, particularly Medicaid, and may go after Medicare and Social Security.

Gordon believes that economic growth is driven by population growth and productivity — which are likely to decrease due to lower labor-market participation and an increasingly elderly population. Trump campaigned by stirring up white fears of immigration, but a mass deportation campaign could further depress both population growth and labor-market participation rates. If we don’t change the course we are on, the only growth industry might be books about inequality.





XCHIBENIGIS

# A TASTE OF THE WORLD

## IN A QUEENS KITCHEN, REFUGEES SERVE UP HOMELAND DELICACIES

INTERVIEW BY PETER RUGH

**A**t a humble commercial kitchen in Queens, women from Syria, Iraq, Guinea-Conakry, Nepal and Eritrea are working together to cook up delicacies from their homelands and send them out, hot and steaming, across the hungry city. Under the tutelage of Juan Suarez de Lezo, a veteran of numerous Michelin-starred restaurants, they are utilizing home cooking knowledge passed down from generations to feed hundreds of people a day. They're serving up culinary delights you'd be hard-pressed to find anywhere else in America, even in New York. And another thing they each have in common: They're refugees.

The catering service, Eat Offbeat, is the brainchild of Manal Kahi, herself a transplant from Beirut. Kahi says that when she first arrived stateside in 2013 she noticed the hummus just wasn't as tasty as in Lebanon. That sent her on a mission to master her grandmother's recipe and left her wondering what other flavors New Yorkers were missing out on. Four years later, Eat Offbeat headquarters is a bustling rebuke to the politics of xenophobia, jingoism and divisiveness that have gripped the nation — even if Kahi prefers to avoid politics and let the food do the talking.

Kahi was kind enough, however, to speak with The Independent this month about offering New Yorkers culinary refuge, Iraqi momos and the international language of food. Eat Offbeat is raising funds for a cookbook on Kickstarter. Learn more about it at [eatoffbeat.com/cookbook](http://eatoffbeat.com/cookbook).

**PETER RUGH:** What was it like coming from Beirut and encountering the food here in New York? I take it you weren't very impressed by the quality of the hummus?

**MANAL KALI:** I love the food here. I mean, the hummus per se was not great in the grocery stores. Clearly there are some restaurants that make great hummus, but the one you buy in grocery stores wasn't the same as the one I would get back home. The one I made back home was so much better.

As for food you can get in the city, it's so diverse, but in terms of ethnic restaurants you sometimes have to go really deep into Queens or somewhere like that to find places that are really authentic. And even in a city as cosmopolitan as New York, you still don't find cuisines from places like Eritrea, Nepal, Syria or Iraq. You might find one restaurant somewhere, but it's not that common.

That's why we thought this idea was good. We serve cuisines that are hard to find and we thought it would be good to highlight them, while at the same time creating jobs and opportunities for talented refugees.

*Is there a philosophy behind Offbeat?*

We have a few goals. The first is to provide quality jobs to talented home cooks who happen to be refugees by status, but are by nature great chefs. The second goal is to build bridges between those who are cooking in the kitchen and New Yorkers who are eating our food, making an easier way for them to connect through something as great as food. And the ultimate goal is to change the narrative and show a different story about refugees. They are the chefs. They are the heroes. So it's switching perspectives a bit.

We're where adventurous eaters can find refuge. It's really about highlighting the fact that, in this case, refugees are helping us. They don't need our help. They are the ones helping New Yorkers try new flavors.

*Have there been any discussions in the kitchen about Trump's Muslim travel ban? Are folks worried about the political climate here?*

What we're doing is focusing on the food. That's what we do. By the number of orders we've received people are very clearly showing their support for us. And we feel that it is more urgent than ever, we're more determined than ever, to keep doing what we're doing.

*It seems like this effort is, by example, counteracting the idea that because people are different they can't live side-by-side. At Offbeat there are people from different parts of the world all working together.*

Oh, for sure, and everyone loves it. We all love it. Everyone learns everyone else's recipes. It's an exchange of richness and words. People are speaking different languages and somehow they understand each other.

What often happens is that when someone feels comfortable, they switch from English to their native tongue. And sometimes I can see it happening that people are just understanding each other, although they're speaking different languages! I don't know how that happens, but they kind of get used to each other.

*Can you think of an example of cross cultural polination you've witnessed?*

Our Nepali chef makes a lot of momos (dumplings) but she makes a vegetarian version, since she's a vegetarian. Our Iraqi chef loves beef. What she does is make her own beef filling and fills the momos with that. So now we have something with an Iraqi filling on the inside but it's momos on the outside.

*Does food generate sensory cultural memories for you? And do you feel that your chefs have the same relationship with food?*

Personally, the easiest way to remember is to call home, but there's a seven-hour time difference in Lebanon. The second easiest way is to make something, try some food. The spices and things will sometimes bring back certain memories. I always have those ingredients I would need to make something Lebanese very quickly at home. And I think that's also true with our chefs. At home they cook food from their own countries. If they already cook it so well for their families, we want them to cook it for New Yorkers and help New Yorkers discover the kind of cooking they do at home.

*I'm wondering about the challenge of going from cooking at home to a professional kitchen. I cook a lot at home but I can't imagine cooking on a line. That seems very intense.*

All of our chefs are very passionate about home cooking. They already have that talent of knowing what to put next or when to add the oil or at what point you mix the ingredients. All this knowledge you might be able to learn somewhere, but really it takes years and years of watching someone making it or having someone tell you.

We're really counting on that knowledge that they've acquired from their mothers and grandmothers and grandfathers or whoever taught them to cook. Then scale comes in, learning how to move in a professional kitchen and to take your recipe from cooking for five people to 200, 300, 700 people. A dish that has a lot of tomatoes — instead of chopping five or six tomatoes for your family, you're chopping 200 or 300 tomatoes! It can get challenging and it also can get boring. That's why you have a big team, where everyone works in a line and helps each other out.

*Tell me about the impetus behind the cookbook.*

We want change the narrative around refugees. We wanted to get our story out in a different format. The fact is that people — outside of New York, outside of the United States even — are sending us a lot of messages asking, "Can you send us food?" Well, we can't send food, so we wanted to find something that we could send all over, a way for us to get our story told beyond New York, not with food, but with recipes.

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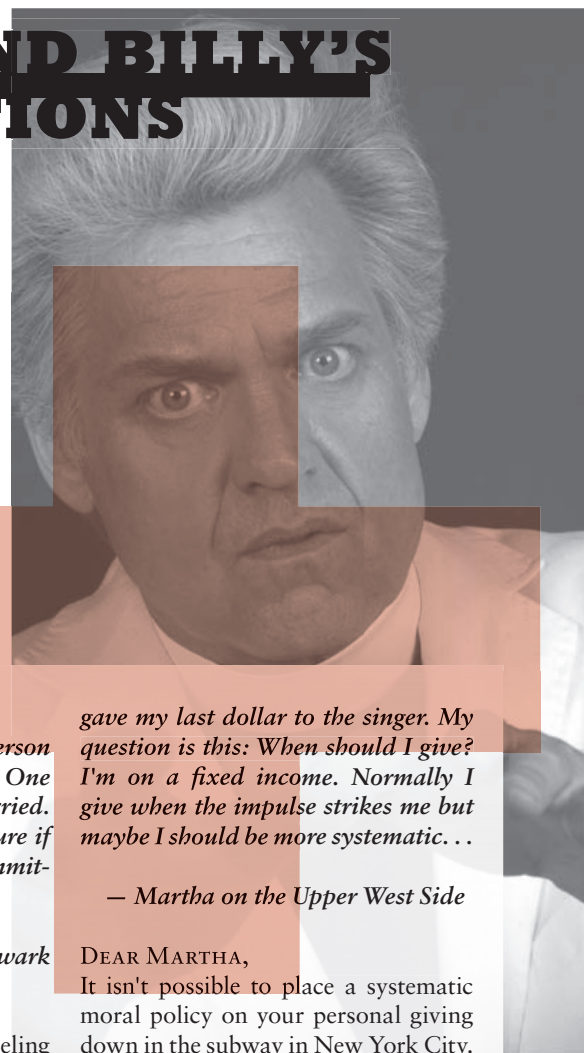
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## REVEREND BILLY'S REVELATIONS



JOHN QUILTY

Dear Reverend Billy,  
I'm dating an undocumented person who is at risk of being deported. One way she'd be safe is if we got married. I want to help her but I'm not sure if we're ready for that kind of commitment. What should I do?

— G., Newark

DEAR G.,  
Lots of people get married not feeling ready and they spend a century together. Trump is a tragic jolt to our soul. That's what 9/11 was. You know what we do with tragedies on that scale? We get married. We get pregnant. We take our lives in new directions. This white nationalism is a tsunami: A drastic response is wise. Go ahead, change yourself radically. I myself am involved in a flourishing romance that became a marriage in the spring after 9/11. Don't be afraid to let events speed you up.

Marriage is the action of caring; of laughter, quiet moments and working together for years toward having a family. The everyday action of a marriage puts the preliminary fears in the rearview mirror pretty quickly. I'm no yenta, but my bet is that the practice of the marriage is what will help you both. (I'm no lawyer either but you should probably also consult an immigration attorney if you decide to tie the knot.)

You say you want to help her like it's a one-way street. Did you propose yet? If she says "Yes!" then I'm sure that she has plans to help you, too. If you two do decide to tie the knot, I recommend you see an immigration lawyer to help you through this process.

• • •

*The other day on the subway, a young woman got on and began singing the most beautiful aria. It seemed nearly everyone on the train gave her something from their pockets, including myself. Literally, at the next stop, she got off and a woman with a baby in her arms got on. I felt like I was in a sociology experiment! The woman with the baby started asking for money and hardly anyone gave her a thing, I guess since they'd just shared with someone else. I could hardly look the mother in the eye because I*

*gave my last dollar to the singer. My question is this: When should I give? I'm on a fixed income. Normally I give when the impulse strikes me but maybe I should be more systematic. . .*

— Martha on the Upper West Side

DEAR MARTHA,

It isn't possible to place a systematic moral policy on your personal giving down in the subway in New York City. I knew a lady once who had a policy of not giving money to white males. Well, okay, but — always?

Lurching along to the bumps with 47 people in a train car under the East River, I don't find myself wanting to make generalizations about the people around me. Everyone is more than the snarky labels we give them. That person across from me isn't just a yuppie, and that guy with the Mets cap isn't just a Mets fan. This is where racism and all the killer isms begin.

What happens when strangers break through this, and start looking at each other, really inquisitively looking, wondering about each other? Two human beings coming closer to each other — that experience is always un-

**DID YOU PROPOSE  
YET? IF SHE SAYS  
"YES!" THEN I'M  
SURE THAT SHE HAS  
PLANS TO HELP  
YOU, TOO.**

precedented. So, if one has power and the other has none, like you and the panhandler — don't "type" her. Ask yourself, "How is this person original, like no-one else?" That's the one who will take your help and help you back.

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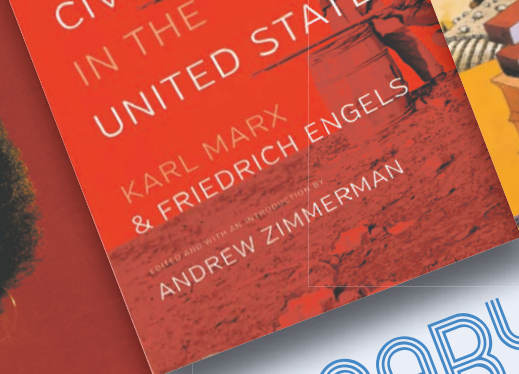
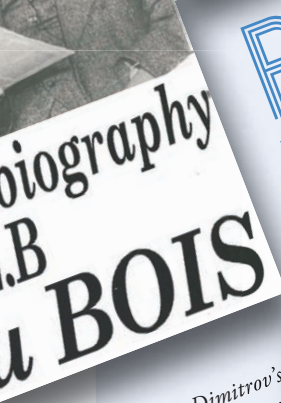
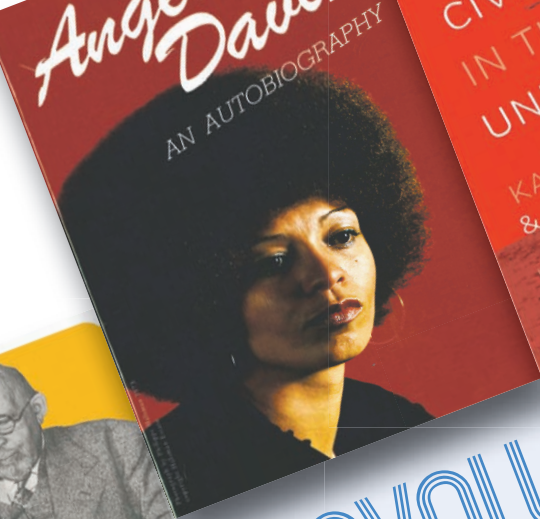
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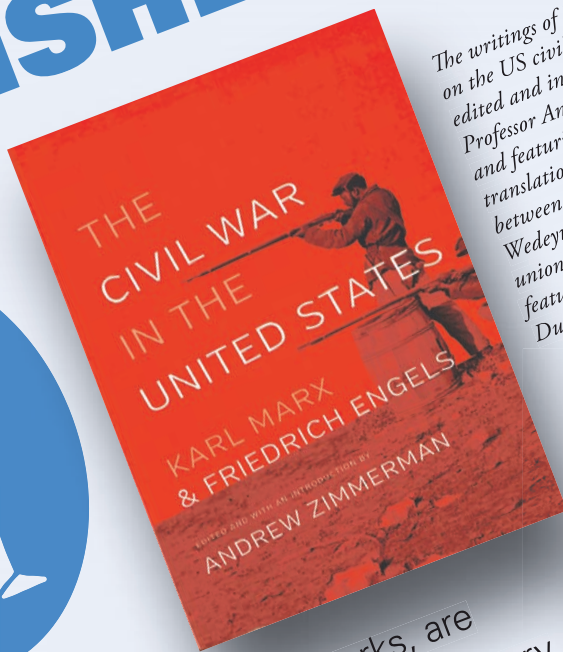
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